Over the Schuylkill:
Aughts Philly Complete
Introduction

If one totem of Aughts Philly is left in the ground (maybe in one of the cemeteries at the corner of 4th and Pine) for generations to come to remember us by, this is it. It is exciting for me both to put this together and to unleash it, even if it is into the arid flatness of recession-ravaged 2014. For many of us, the date of release isn’t a particularly important factor; against the American grain, and withstanding charges of pretentiousness, the major artists of the Philadelphia Renaissance were writing, painting, taking pictures and even playing shows and staging readings for posterity. What we wanted most is not what most American artists seem to want—quick fame, easy money, extensive short-term notoriety. Our great European forefathers cleared us a path to a higher, more ornate, complex, and ultimately rewarding vista which demonstrated for us the superiority of creating the right way to go the greatest possible distance into the future. So that, whether this 2014 is like 1974 (in many ways it is) is ultimately immaterial; this collection is not the staking of a claim as much as a planting of a seed. The Philadelphia Renaissance, Aughts Philly starts here; it is meant to grow as an aesthetic, social, and sexual phenomenon over many decades and centuries. It is also, as was our intention as worked, meant to mock the silliness, triteness, insipidity, and frigidity of twentieth century American art and life. We rejected the family situations we came out of—they not only seemed empty to us, the American humanities tradition of pride of place being given to the facile, the underworked, and the comparatively thoughtless was anathema to both the manner in which we created and the way we lived our day to day lives in the Aughts, and the balance we struck between tight and loose, disciplined behavior and libidinous wildness, classicism and in-the-moment heat.

The Philly Free School, Aughts Philly, and the Philadelphia Renaissance all have slightly different connotations. What is fascinating to me about Aughts Philly, in retrospect, is that the way popular culture impulses manifested were no less classicist and elitist (in the enlightened sense I designate here) than what the high art echelon here had to offer. Everyone’s synapses were firing towards a shared target—you can call it noir, the moody, a tinge of “Goth,” the Europeanized, but no one here was lining up to take out the edges or the darkness from what they were doing. As much as I am passionately engaged with pushing this particular collective oeuvre forward, in all its chiaroscuro haziness, it is interesting to me that much of our best art from the Aughts caught in the air the recession which would overtake the West within a few years, and leave behind our shadows all over Center City, West Philly, and South Philly (perhaps, for the Fellowship I was given at Temple U., North Philly can be included), as I take those artfully enumerated shadows and memorialize them the right way for posterity here. We worked under the shadow, it seems, of a looming darkness, but we did so with a good amount of joie de vivre and panache as well. In a way, what Aughts Philly does is to take Hollywood’s bet and up the ante about three or four-fold; and, in doing so, and in beginning the first rich American humanities tradition capable of translating widely on the Continent as well, our versions of the spectral will light up the imagination and intellect of the century to come with a sense of possibility, sensuality, and rare thought.

Adam Fieled, 2014
APPARITIONS AND LOST TWINS:
THE PHILADELPHIA RENAISSANCE PARTS 1 & 2
ADAM FIELED
THE PHILADELPHIA RENAISSANCE
Adam Fieled
INTRODUCTION

If you're not scared of us, you should be. What was accomplished in The Philadelphia Renaissance, marked roughly by the ten year period 2000-2010, or “the Aughts,” covers so much ground, from the popular arts through the higher arts and into the humanities in general, and breaks with so many American cultural traditions, from the rejection of European classicism to a preponderance of fame-and-profit motivated forces, that it is difficult to believe that forces could’ve coalesced so serendipitously. Yet, the aesthetic favored by Philadelphia Renaissance artists is dark—eerie, chiaroscuro, steeped in multiple meanings, secret passageways, many of them extending back over centuries of European high art and culture, and the secrets there unearthed of form and theme. Conversely, part of the miracle of The Philadelphia Renaissance is that, distinctions and classifications aside, it brought an entire generation of younger Philadelphia artists together, in every personal capacity imaginable—rock musicians, poets, painters, journalists, novelists, DJs, hipsters, and literary theorists mixed and mingled, sans restraints, of vanity or otherwise. Put simply, the Philadelphia Renaissance years were generous ones, and the ferocity of the forces unleashed, from Dirty Frank’s and McGlinchey’s to Woody’s at 13th and Walnut, bound us to each other with passion, joie de vivre, sometimes antagonism but always engagement. No one who had a stake in this Renaissance was ignored, and even when we fought, it was from ideals, principles, and whatever ethos came under discussion to ignite them, and us.

In the Philadelphia Renaissance, it seems to me, everyone was queer. This Renaissance involved a conglomeration of individuals, and individual sensibilities, so at a tangent to normative ones that even walking down Broad Street, PR participants got stared at. Some of us were literally queer, some of us were not—but the mentality which arises from severe, ineluctable difference, which sets individuals apart from the standard or typical, was a sine qua non to join the extremely unlikely squad which constituted our ranks. It also needs to be said that, within our constraints of freakishness and extremely developed individuality, most PR artists maintained a streak of frankness and candidness, sans bluster, braggadocio, and empty “fronting,” which separated and still separates us from what is typical in New York, L.A., San Francisco, and the rest. In Philadelphia in the Aughts, thoughtfulness was cool—so was actual bed-hopping, actual drug-taking, and actual mythologizing out of these behaviors. Where class was concerned, there was wide variation in our respective backgrounds, from working class right up to upper middle; but none of us, not one of the important PR core, were raised rich, and none of us had trust-funds, either.

It should be clear why this congeries of complexes and circumstances around culture, a city, and a period of time would and will be frightening to the entrenched cultural intelligentsia of America, particular in vulnerability-laden 2014. The typical lynchpins which hold American cultural movements together—old money, wheeling and dealing, flim-flam, media buy-outs, gallery buy-outs, print press buy-outs, venue buy-outs, are not where we were or are at. Strictly speaking, no one has bought us anything. Yet, the space cleared for us, especially on Internet Archive, in a locked, permanent account which no amount of money could buy out, proves to me that, slowly but surely, we are making the right ramparts fall towards a full-scale cultural revolution from within the United States; and, for the first time, a cultural revolution born out of art and art-impulses which are durable enough, formidable enough, imaginative enough, and headstrong enough about adherence to individualized sensibilities to last more or less forever. So, be afraid. Be very afraid.

Adam Fieled, 2014
THE WAITING ROOM: ESSAYS 2014
ADAM FIELED
DEEP NOIR

What "noir" connotes, in popular culture, is an aesthetic condition of extreme stylization. Look at the elements which configure, say, the average Raymond Chandler novel, and which do not change from book to book; stylized elements- a hard-bitten detective (Marlowe) pursuing a treacherous villain, encountering a standard cast of characters. There's the coy femme fatale, attached somehow to a criminal underworld or with underworld connections; dirty and double-dealing cops, who may or may not be trustworthy, and in on certain hits; and innocent bystanders drawn into matrixes of crime and hustle against their will. What stylization implies, as a kind of mold for artistic forms to fit into, is homogeneity, and the solidity of homogeneity- we, as readers, never need to wonder what to expect from Raymond Chandler. To the extent that more serious artists develop individual and individualized aesthetic concerns and formal-thematic, consistent topoi, stylization in their work becomes inevitable- this is how we know Picasso from Manet, Manet from David; or, in literature, Milton from Byron, and Byron from Browning; etc. If I am interested in "noir," and in poaching "noir" from American popular culture and granting it another context, it is because the stylistic elements of my Apparition Poems series shares, in the kinds of moods, impressions, and ambience generated, something with noir, and noir stylistic conventions. All three major Apparition Poems collections cohere around a set of imperatives, which lean towards the revelation of shadows rather than light, dark tones and hues rather than bright ones, and labyrinthine complexities rather than scintillating clarities. Levels of cognitive awareness, represented in texts which seek to boast some philosophical import, particularly in regards to
ontological awareness in the midst of extreme (even pornographic) vulgarity, separate the Apparition Poems drastically from the rote, pop culture consonant facility of Chandler's books.

Indeed, the chiasmus between noir and serious, sustained intellection is, as far as I know, a novel mode of stylistic inquiry and exploration. My equivalent of Chandler's shocking plot-twists and peripeteias are linguistic innovations which multiply meanings and make key words and phrases serve dual, or triple, ends; so that these words and phrases are set in place, figuratively, to "split the heads" of their audience, towards recognitions of hidden semantic-thematic depth, and against surface ("surface-y") orientations and sensibilities. That's why I call my version of noir "deep noir"- the Apparition Poems are crafted, on some semantic levels, from similar molds- towards chiaroscuro and the enchantment of multiple meanings. It is also easy to notice that the Apparition Poems are, in fact, haunted by coy femme fatales, dirty-dealers, and an interrogating, interrogative protagonist ("I"), who attempts to sift his way through mazes of psycho-cognitive, and psycho-affective, complications. The poems shudder towards satori-like head-split semantic inversions; and whether any give satori ends its poem or not, the ultimate stylistic effect is to startle, unsettle, and re-wire the minds of the audience who reads them. Chandler, in a pop culture context sans intellectual heft, is far less unsettling. The Apparition Poems create mysteries and remain centered in them, in a negatively capable fashion, while Chandler's level of stylization insures easy, unchallenging comprehension. Still, I like "noir" as a stylistic formulation around the Apparition Poems nonetheless, because they do create and maintain a "shaded" ambience, which is recognizably itself from poem to poem and book to book. I have spoken of the "body heat" passed from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, in spite of the new century's reservations- and, as one level of inheritance which takes the Apparition Poems to a secure hermeneutic locale, "noir" and "deep noir" both work surprisingly well.

As to the issue of why, in 2014, a "noir" aesthetic, inclusive of formal-thematic depth, would be of wide interest once placed into circulation- the reason is fairly simple. On many levels and in many variegated contexts, few sensibilities other than "noir" could be generally and widely representative in America, against the facile breeziness of post-modernity. The Recession has created a climate, both within and without aesthetics, of entrenched circumstantial darkness and shadowy languor. Untold, unreported catastrophes may have wiped out entire sectors of the population- yet the media chirps away as though nothing has changed. American pop culture is in an advanced state of erosion and deterioration- there are no new rock stars anymore, and new American cinema not only isn't selling but is divested, for the populace, of the perceived glamour which used to enable it to sell. The secret passageways which used to make America interconnect have largely been severed; even as the Internet has created new labyrinths and passageways which often amount to a subversive conspiracy against the normative. The truly noir facet of the Internet is that it allows the American public to understand how and why its been duped; and what's left of a thinking American populace is cognizant of these things. The Apparition Poems were written to hold down a cultural fort radically on the side of haute culture and high art, scribed by a
single author from within the bounds of the United States. For those watching closely, and who know how the American literary landscape has largely been configured over long and short periods of time, this congeries of circumstances is a rebellion and an innovation. That the Apparition Poems are not only indigenously American (if standing, aesthetically, on the shoulders of historical Europe) but indigenously Philadelphian is another innovation— the creation of literary Philadelphia, in the twenty-first century, has to do with the noir elements already built into Philly as a mythological construct.

Philadelphia, much more so than New York (which offers, to my eyes, nothing labyrinthine beneath a bold, brusque surface) is perpetually ravaged by contradictions and conflicting internal imperatives—the Main Line surface/patina is all about the prestige of old money; South Philly prizes blue-collar, ethnic simplicity, but falsely and disingenuously (against the complex and baroque machinations of the South Philly mob); the mob also runs at least partly other suburbs supposed to be middle-class, and standardized to American suburban norms, which they are not; and the "noir" sense, at the end of things, is that Philadelphia is a shadow-plagued city, and what you see is certainly not what you get here. The representatively Philadelphian surface/depth tensions are what make the city fertile ground for high art, rooted in formidably intellectual narratives, slanted towards the stylized chiaroscuro of noir symbolization and signification. Make no mistake—Philly makes a more than reasonable microcosm of the United States, because Philly has many things to hide. Every thoughtful Philadelphian has their own Philadelphia narrative. That Philadelphia is often represented as simple is one of its noir allure-features. Philadelphia, in fact, may be taken as the secret capitol of America, and much of America's internal darkness is exteriorized/embodied with precision in our labyrinths here. From a certain angle, for Philadelphia to produce representative American high art is no stretch at all—higher art requires higher faithfulness to complex human truth. Because complexities are difficult, both to perceive and to assimilate, they are, or can be, dark. If my version of noir borrows stylistically from the likes of Raymond Chandler, the substance of the art is uniquely set within its own thematic manner/mode of confused, perplexing darkness. Yet attempts to unearth deep truth, when performed skillfully, are always cathartic, as pitiful and terrible as the deep ("noir") truth can be, and in this, this art finds its strength and metier.

***Photograph is of Philadelphia City Hall, taken from its West entrance***
ENLIGHTENED ELITISM, ENLIGHTENED CLASSICISM

Living with the remnants of the twentieth century, and twentieth century culture, still around us (in the press, art press and otherwise, and even online to an extent), it is easy to see in what manner my art (and the work of the other PFS artists) can and will be dismissed. For reinstating a demarcation between low and high art, against the imposed confines of post-modern theory, thought, and practice, and radically against the grain of what is acceptable to the American press corps; and for reinstating, also, a historical sense which deals with art century by century, rather than living in a radically circumscribed, perpetually "present" moment; the Philly Free School must needs be attacked by accusations of extreme/extremist classicism and extreme elitism simultaneously. I would like to opine, however, that what we have built into our body of work is a highly advanced, thoughtful, scrupulous, and one might say "enlightened" form of elitism and classicism. Neither I nor my friends had any problem looking the twentieth century, and twentieth century culture, dead in the face; its just that we were catholic enough in our tastes not to limit ourselves. Not working at the behest of spurious, frivolous motives, directed in our tastes by authentic impulses, proclivities, and sympathies, it was obvious to us that the high/"haute" art in century XX seemed constricted, narrow, and vulgarized in its essence into tiny forms and expressions. Maintaining a historical sense, and an ability to make choices owing not to circumstances but to our individual temperaments, we migrated back to the nineteenth century over the twentieth and
stayed there, judging century XX to be a cultural regression, while having, by sheer proximity and "body heat," to allow some twentieth century influence in regardless.

Thus, the language of our symbolizations and significations is polyglot; and if I am forced to answer accusations of elitism and classicism, simply owing to historical depth and diversity of influence, I will state that we made our aesthetic choices very carefully, and had the courage of our convictions to assimilate what moved us the most, from the inside out, rather than acquiescing to internalize what was presented to us as what was most contemporary, representative, and praiseworthy. The pejorative connotations of "classicism" and "elitism" have to do with retrograde, reactionary attitudes, bent into stuffy dismissals of anything new; what PFS has to offer is set at a perpendicular angle to those definitions. We, all of us, have lived and created under intense, group-centered pressure to conform, if conventional, substantial rewards (publication, sales) were to be ours; always with the knowledge that the adjacent post-modern group norm, to stay grounded in a twentieth century ethos at all costs, against any form of historical sense which would challenge this group norm, was configured to delineate what was and what was not acceptable, either theoretically or in practice; and our collective response, from Philadelphia in the Aughts, was to rebel, and to do so publicly, which we did, with panache. As of the initiation of our practice, enlightened classicism and enlightened elitism were both (and largely remain) rebellious stances; and the tyranny of the "present-minded," the vulgar, the thoughtless, the formless, the formulaic, and the insubstantial (to our eyes/ears) has been both a terrible weight for us to bear and heavy shackles for us to attempt to cast off. In the realm of the post-modern, what's "new" is never really new anyway- just as Koons reprises Warhol reprising Duchamp, it is a fraudulent simulacrum of the "new," which disguises the essential nature of genuine artistic innovation (that which creates new formal-thematic contexts, nexuses, and matrixes) in order to advertise its own inversion-heavy (nothing into something) paucity.

The question arises, for myself and others of my ilk, whether our creations are made to subsist as "foster children of silence and slow time"; in other words, whether or not it will be a long, slow haul towards establishing ourselves and our art in a major way, and a way which would be satisfying and gratifying for us. How staunch, as a tightly knit collective, are the post-modernists in 2014? From the evidence my daily life has presented to me, I have induced the knowledge that post-modernity, as a capitalistic, profit-counting institution, has lost ground and momentum in our current Great Recession. My assumptions in this context must, of necessity, be modest- PFS have demonstrably had a significant amount of space cleared for us, but we remain largely unknown to the general public, and no visible chiasmus exists between ourselves, our work, and the American or any other press corps. Yet if raw online numbers are any indication, there is certainly a receptive sector of the American and
European public ready to greet our work with appropriately receptive hearts and minds. This is why the reference to Keats is both interesting and provocative - what we have written and painted must, owing to its depth, thoughtfulness, and formal-thematic richness, take on the sober, austere attire of "foster children of silence and slow time" - but it is intriguing, conversely, to consider that, with our current entropic zeitgeist, in which a populace are starved for authentic passion and intelligence in what they consume, PFS might attract some short-term success as well.

In a contradictory sense, it both is and is not immaterial to me whether this short-term success transpires - to the extent that our work is dealt with seriously, and we are not trivialized, it could be a positive development; yet all of us have enough education in the higher arts to understand that what achieves the most profound impact tends to do so slowly, incrementally, and often imperceptibly, over decades and centuries. This is one salient reason that post-modernity insults our collective intelligence - by reducing the higher arts to a mere adjunct and an underling to the popular arts, it so attempts to erase, in a brutish and militaristic fashion, the entire history of the higher arts beyond its tiny, crabbed purview, that the entire post-modern endeavor amounts to a sustained assault of anti-art and anti-culture on entrenched, yet often powerless, adversaries. In a very real sense, all PFS's elitism and classicism entail is a deep-set appreciation of the entire history of the higher arts, which we have refused to conceal or elide in an attempt to achieve short-term, ephemeral, and extremely hypocritical success. Why it is that aesthetic progress has to come at the expense of a reviled, demeaned, and somehow naive past is something I've never understood - now, as the new century coalesces, I've been led to the conclusion that auto-destruction of the history of the higher arts, as both a stated and a surreptitious post-modern intention/ambition, has had nothing to do with anything but fear and greed, set lecherously and coercively into motion to homogenize an already blasted Western cultural landscape.

The commonplace, known to art-world insiders, that post-modern artists have more invested in pop culture imbecility and business ventures than in their own work (which may or may not sell for enormous sums of money), is shorthand for post-modernity's rejection of both passion and intellect, and for anything humanistically expressive at all. Confounding this, our Philadelphia was Edenic for us. Philadelphia is known to be as corrosive and lecherous as any other American metropolis, in some ways more so; and how Philadelphia is sold in the media largely inverts, in classic post-modern fashion, both its beauty and its distinctive ambience. What PFS pursued here was very unique, as we found a way to progress while conserving, and vice versa; and the "twist in the tale" is that our myth of what Philadelphia is may be "the keeper" for the entire length of the century to come.

***Photograph is “The Fall” or “Portrait: Adam and Mary” by Mary Harju***
The manner in which I have formulated "Earth and World" on the Purification Chain enumerated in "Space Between"- "Earth" as representative of pure "presence," the being of beings, and thus a Primary Mode; a hinge, also, to durability and permanence; "World" as representative of transient contingencies, dynamic configurations not uniquely set in place at specific junctures, and thus a Secondary Mode; and that the two modes, in reciprocal relationship, not only suggest each other's presence but imitate each other internally sans effort, towards discourse or intuition; has its own way of reacting to Wordsworth's "Prelude," as a potential signifier in the twenty-first century, not bypassing but absorbing and discharging the nihilistic dismemberment of twentieth century humanities productions, and establishing a meaningful chiasmus. The objects upon which Wordsworth expends his subjectivities; "natural" objects; not only affect a catharsis of "World" consciousness and "World" energy but establish a basis for trans-temporal nurturance as meta-rational linkage with perfected, totalized "Earth."

We, in the twenty-first century, are not so sanguine in our relationship to "Earth" and Earth-energies; nor are we convinced that the trans-temporal is easily accessed as a circuit into/through human consciousness; what we may substitute for Wordsworth's Naturalism are levels of meta-engagement with our own cognitions- no exterior "Natural" can substitute for cognitive engagement with cognitive processes themselves. The twentieth century radically destabilized our relationship with nature, and the Natural was pilloried by pulverizing forces of urbanization and technological encumbrance- leaving us to find nurturance not in Wordsworth's engagement with the permanent, exterior to his own consciousness, but with the permanence of his ability to extend cognition into transcendental realms as a natural-in-itself. For the twenty-first century, cognition itself must be our Earth; and the permanence perceived to be inhering in cognition, the temporal constraints of Worldliness can purify our cognitions into refined awareness of how and with what manner we may be able to merge into presence, the being of beings, nature.
Recuperation of Piety: Tolstoy and the Great Recession

Anna Karenina, the protagonist of Count Leo Tolstoy’s eponymously named epic saga, has a hinge, and an unfortunate one, both to the twentieth century in general and to America’s twentieth century. The constituent factor of her selfishness— an inability to visualize anything but a narcissistic world, with her standing at the center of a maelstrom of action and dynamic movement in general— shows us how prescient Tolstoy was in anticipating late nineteenth century trends which wound up coloring and animating the twentieth. Anna Karenina would (and has) made an excellent Hollywood goddess; her good looks, sex appeal, willingness to transgress, emotional vicissitudes, and ultimately tragic suicide all seem like grist for the mill which is constructed to hook in audiences with artifice, outrageousness, and morbid fascination. Yet, by the end of “Anna Karenina,” Anna’s voice has been lost, in the dialogues which end the book between Levin, his family and brood, along with two other voices which bear the lusty insignia of screen glamour— Count Vronsky, Anna’s paramour, and Anna’s brother Stiva, a bourgeois, aristocratic libertine. The Levin family is set in place to represent virtue, piety, and the disclosure of “the good,” in a generalized sense, from interrogation of the larger questions of human existence, through Levin’s own free-associative musings, which we hear, from his intellectual brother Koznyshev, and from the simple graceful devotion of his wife Kitty.

This last portion of the book can be taken, in its context, as rather jejune, in that the conclusions which Levin comes to are jejune, or as revelatory of what human consciousness can achieve of balance and harmony, taking into consideration the material, emotional, and spiritual vagaries of human life. But with the elimination of the libertine element which has dominated the text since its introduction, during which we see Stiva Oblonsky taken to task for cheating on his wife Dolly, and Anna Karenina efficaciously intervening on his behalf, unaware that she is about to become a hypocrite, we see the point Tolstoy seems to be making, and it is a stern one— that those reckless and selfish enough to live their lives as a permanent wallow in sensual enjoyments generally do not have much to contribute to
dialogues whose telos is to perpetuate useful thoughtfulness and worthy idealism among the human race. The brilliance which separates Tolstoy from a middle-weight like, say, George Eliot, means that he does not editorialize or pontificate; his complete and totalized objectivism encourages us to experience the structure of the book’s final scenes in such a way that we may glean for ourselves the author’s intentionality. Ultimately, it is not necessarily sensual enjoyments, as pursuits-in-themselves, which seem to damn Anna, Alexey Vronsky, and Stiva Oblonsky (who could carry the moniker the “Hollywood Trio” of the book) to silent obsolescence— it is their inability to see past themselves, to have thoughts which reach for higher realities, to connect their lives not only to what is base or abased but to what is transcendent. Anna, Vronsky, and Stiva live in their moods and their senses— though the novel presents them as very capable of social artifice, and the ability to appear to be humbling themselves, all dote on scenarios entered into in which they can watch themselves “shine,” above and beyond the social or romantic brilliance of others.

The desire to “shine,” above and beyond others, especially when it is allowed to transform into an overriding passion, is one major story of America’s twentieth century. The banality and vapidity of America’s century is that behaviors encouraged almost always leaned towards the predilections of Tolstoy’s Hollywood Trio rather than Levin’s searching, scrupulous devotion towards psycho-spiritual reckoning. What Hollywood was for America’s twentieth century— an invitation to gluttonous narcissism; a cultural not worthy to be called cultural on a world/historical level; and a lifestyle which went far beyond the confines of movies and entertainment commodities, so that all of America was swept up into a social morass of decaying, drug dealing, gratuitous devotion bordering on slavery to thoughtlessness and lecherous, permanent intoxication; the sense that all of these complexes are variegated manifestations of materialism and materialistic interest, against the possible existence of any form of idealism, self-sacrifice, or devotion to humanistic endeavor; all these are what make Hollywood the best and most poignant paradigm model for America’s twentieth century. This is sad.

None of this would be relevant, either Tolstoy’s schematizations or America’s drift into materialistic lassitude, if America in 2014 were not suffering holocaust-level repercussions from the Hollywood century which has just passed. Like Anna, Tolstoy’s anti-heroine, America has lost the thread of coherence and cohesiveness which has bound it together for so long, and dissolved into not only incoherence but semi-dementia. What manifests in America’s mainstream media in 2014 has a quality of being from a bygone era, being devolved from any kind of truth-consonance into the state of, outlet by outlet, story by story, permanent non sequiturs. Anna’s final monologue, before she jumps in front of the train which kills her, hinges on hatred; as she rides to the station, she sees around her everywhere those pretending love but feeling hate. The psychology of this is interesting, because it manifests the phenomenon of “projection”— Anna’s projects her own syndrome, pretending love but experiencing ambivalence and hatred onto all she sees— but, likewise, along a slightly different path, all the American media can do in 2014 is project onto the public that its Hollywood value system has remained intact, and that, even during the aridity and deprivations of the Great Recession, everyone is where they were ten or twenty years ago, and move forward(which is actually backwards) from there. Millions and millions of Americans are suffering the Anna Karenina syndrome— pushed into no-win situations by years of narcissistic endeavor and thoughtlessness, and forced to watch their own minds decay as the media world they once relied on for inspiration decays around them. One constituent feature of the Great Recession has been specifically this— surrounded by death, famine, and other signs of holocaust, the public looks for support from a media at least
idealistic enough to tell some of the truth some of the time, and receives nothing but “the usual” vapid, banal blarney which sufficed for adequate consciousness-fodder in the twentieth century. As with Anna, when we need nurturance, we find none.

The Levin family, who close out “Anna Karenina,” have recuperated a sense of piety about their lives, for themselves and for their relation to the outside world; piety, as Levin notes, gleaned from observing what Levin calls the “revelation of good.” Levin does associate this nexus of moral-ethical interrelations from Christianity; and it is a thoughtful version of Christianity, in which revelation follows from extended, sometimes torturous cognition. It is the antithesis of Hollywood and the Hollywood lifestyle, which discourages cognition, and embraces revelation only of the glories and exploits of the self over others. Though Anna is briefly mentioned towards the end of the book, and of course Dolly has separated herself from Stiva enough to be under, with her children, Levin’s aegis, it is clear that Levin has drawn a symbolic line in the sand, and to be under his aegis the frivolity of the Hollywood Trio need not be discussed or considered at length. At the end of the day, there is not that much to discuss about Anna, Vronsky, and Stiva— they lived their lives wrapped up in moments meant to glorify themselves and their fleeting passions to the most luxuriant possible extent. Since we have now endured an entire American century of Annas, Vronskys, and Stivas, it is no surprise that media pundits who throw the same tired semiotic garbage in the shrinking public’s face are rewarded with plummeting sales and suddenly non-existent prestige. Twentieth century signifiers— Warhol’s soup cans, Marilyn Monroe, John Kennedy, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Ronald Reagan— are all hewn from the same thoughtless, self-gratifying material. None signify thoughtfulness in any meaningful way— as for piety or idealism, Hollywood made these virtues seem not only unimportant but so drastically unfashionable as to constitute an insult to the banal, vapid anti-dignity of a century hewn not from stone but from mud. The way to recuperate some genuine piety in 2014 America, is to do as the Levins do— cognate. Use your brains, and connect yourself and your life to larger realities, in a rigorous way. If I seem to be pontificating, it is a reflex reaction against the scarifying moral-ethical emptiness of what could be the single dumbest human century on record. What Tolstoy has taught us has a simple application here— if the century opening up encourages cognition, it will have a voice that the last century could not have. Voices worth remembering are usually considered ones.
Chop with a Machete: Nineteenth Century Provincialism?

It is only 2014, and already a body of work has coalesced and established itself publicly in the higher arts in America which threatens the hegemony of the twentieth century’s accepted, dominant strains of aesthetic theory and practice. What this body of work largely establishes is an imperative to dismantle, disorient, and, ultimately, destroy twentieth century aesthetic ideologies, from the inside out, and towards several foundational recognitions— that thematics, largely lost in twentieth century avant-garde formalism, must be reinstated as a constituent element in the higher arts, to set a well-rounded standard for twenty-first century higher art; that, for the creation of higher art and for its dissemination to be as rich and potentially durable as possible, the entire history of high art must be embraced rather than discarded; and that a meaningful demarcation between high and popular art, blurred into obscurity in century XX, needs also to be reinstated in order to acknowledge, appreciate, and reward the seriousness, thoughtfulness, and depth-consonance (formal and thematic) of manifestly superior (even in culturally relative contexts) aesthetic efforts.

The quandary with the fulsome insertion of these foundational recognitions into recognized, standardized aesthetic discourses is that the century XX old guard will consider them “provincial”— that they are a retreat from the theoretical advances of the twentieth century into the parochial, patriarchal, culturally homogenous nineteenth century, and that the intellectually sophisticated cultural relativism which would be lost would constitute a profound, emasculating step backwards from world-consonance, queer-consonance, advanced gender-consonance, and genuine, responsible socio-political awareness. The problem I have, as a practicing artist and theorist, with the twentieth century’s advanced aesthetic theoretical apparatuses and those who espouse them is relatively simple— for all that key texts bravely consolidate a sense of responsibility around issues of gender, race, sexual orientation, and all facets of cultural relativism, the works of literary and visual higher art produced in the twentieth century are so drastically inferior, both formally and thematically (and in avant-garde twentieth century literature, narrow, hermetically sealed, anti-humanistic formalism ruled the roost quite unequivocally), to what was produced in the nineteenth century, that what has been produced of serious merit in the twenty-first century
smoothly and organically “skips” twentieth century literature (and visual art), and erects itself from nineteenth century models.

Looking at the nineteenth century and the twentieth, in theoretical and practical chiasmus, each century manifested its own brand (or manner or form) of provincialism—and I am arguing here that, despite its outward protestations of courage and a responsible, culturally egalitarian humanism, the twentieth century’s form and manner of aesthetic provincialism, which eschewed the rigorous and well-rounded in practice for the facile, and did away, in many sectors, with any serious approach to coherence, cohesiveness, and applied thematic focus altogether, letting tiny, slight formal gestures unsuccessfully pick up the gestalt slack, is far more steep than the nineteenth’s manner of culturally homogenous artistic production, and makes the twentieth century both potentially a featherweight one, a laughingstock, and one easy to “dispose of” in the new century’s ambience.

As the twenty-first century develops, many suspect that a nasty conspiracy looms behind the vapid, vacuous fraudulence of twentieth century art, aesthetics, and other branches of the humanities. The conspiracy has to do with narcotics, and the widespread, flagrant trafficking of narcotics. The supposed narrative runs that high level, high maintenance drug dealers and drug dealing conglomerates, including wealthy families, in the twentieth century were fond, for various business reasons (of convenience and for the purpose of subterfuge) of adopting and maintaining “fronts” for their illicit activities; and that, by misrepresenting the business interests at hand while simultaneously creating a veneer of cultural, humanitarian respectability, the higher arts provided both a useful outlet and a manner or form of representing states of business affairs, backwards and sideways. If twentieth century higher art appears to be abased and degraded beyond belief, it may be because its primary purpose was not to symbolize or embody the heights and depths to which human consciousness can rise or fall, but to display the wares of illicit, violence-driven commerce—and thus, to enact the humanities’ dissolution into cacophonous nothingness.

The suspicion that, in the twentieth century, powerful drug dealers and drug dealing conglomerates had bifurcated motivations—both to achieve maximum profit-gain and to destroy the humanities’ integrity in the process—is a very real and compelling one, when a seasoned intellect is forced to take seriously what was written and published under the high art aegis in that century, particularly the second half of that century, when the flatulent specter of the “post-modern” was shoved, by brute force and greed, into public prominence. The narrative of the central suspicion continues, that many Modern and post-modern artists were not authentic individuals but “characters,” assembled by drug dealing conglomerates to represent business interests. Thus, the differentiated, distinguished figure of the twentieth century author may prove to have been a character actor, fulfilling a specially scripted, particularized dossier—and the foundational structures behind or beneath these characters would include hacks specifically hired to write books to fulfill (again) dossier scripts; and drug dealers, prepared to send messages (“decoys”) through their character’s speech, social interactions, and published writings, whether threats, recriminations, instructions, or affirmations of profitable conditions in different sectors.

I have hypothesized that the twentieth century may go on record as the “Hollywood Century”; if this is so, it is because an abundance of “characters” occupying the public stage, rather than authentic, autonomous individuals, assured that the twentieth century’s public sphere was created and maintained in a spirit of drastically bad faith, reducing the humanities to the dull-minded tawdrieness of the cheapest, flimsiest popular culture and kitsch, and for no good reason other than dope deals. This, if it is the case, even if only potentially the case, or half the case, is as silly, sad, and pathetic a century dossier as a humanities century can
possibly have; and accounts for the twentieth century higher artist’s perpetual attempt, from Duchamp forward, to degrade, abase, and destroy the higher arts from the inside out (both of humanistic interest and of intellectual substance.) This “century sickness” is largely behind us, though we see remnants of it in the American mainstream press, and many of us are prepared to be objective about it— and what has been established in higher art contexts in the twenty-first century by 2014 arguably trumps the achievements of the entire, oafish, bastardized twentieth century. Thus, the sorrow of waste and extreme disenchantment is tempered for many of us by wind filling new sails, the novel congeries of circumstances around which must still seem, in their fledgling state, undetermined and indeterminate.

**Painting is “Saturn Devouring His Son” by Goya**

***This essay was featured in “On Barcelona,” ed. Halvard Johnson, in 2014***
How mythologies proliferate and perpetuate themselves among the human race - the mechanics of mythology - is a fascinating issue, and involves knowledge of humanities (sociology/anthropology) which I do not have. Yet, I begin this essay on the side of a certain kind of knowledge - that for many years in Philadelphia in the Aughts, many young artists were developing rapidly and in tandem. The formal-thematic concerns they shared were easy to notice - expressed sexuality, both queer and straight, as a manifestation of achieved personal freedom and expressive competence, and against the backdrop of a faltering national economy and socio-political landscape; a rekindled romance with the haute culture of the nineteenth century, particularly nineteenth century Europe, as a repository of worthy
forms and psycho-cognitive, textual or imagistic vistas; a generalized rejection of the Aughts-normative, and post-modernity's rote, dry, unimaginative and bloody-minded cultural stranglehold from cash-built, internally corrupt fortresses of media, galleries, academic institutions, journals, and presses; and the city of Philadelphia itself as a muse and fetish, specifically owing to the city's manifest complexities, exquisite architecture (aligning Philly secretly with Paris and other embodiments of haute-European appearances, and against American media cliches), and the spirit of socio-sexual freedom and aesthetic daring which reigned as a zeitgeist for many years in the Aughts here, and which, once descended, animated affected lives with a perpetual sense of liberation, release, and intoxication.

This congeries of complexes and circumstances constitutes, for me, the backbone of what I call the Philadelphia Renaissance- but as, in the midst of text-creation, I interrogate myths, mythologies, and processes of myth-making, it occurs to me that for a genuine, cherished myth (or series of myths) to take root in Western consciousness around what happened in Philadelphia in the Aughts, some form of collective will need to develop for the aforementioned proliferations and perpetuations to occur- in other words, myths cannot be created completely in a vacuum. I have failed to enumerate what we were (and are) up against, which is formidable- a shadow-Philadelphia (and America) of faux-cultural sectors, set in place only to coerce awful, inferior, thoughtless and formless art into entrenched positions of demonstrable power and prestige; the "deep pockets" able, for subterranean reasons, to buy out these contrived, inauthentic positions, and which can and will be willing to block attempts to consolidate Philadelphia Renaissance art. Our art, of course, was not created or placed into circulation from "deep pockets" but by young artists living on, and from, their wits, instincts, and impulses; and we must also face the collective will of local and national press to bury the Philadelphia Renaissance, whose organic, sexualized, and aesthetically emancipated approach disrupts normative practices and conventional American myth-making mechanics. The most enduring kind of high art, whenever and wherever it erupts, is always disruptive, because a genuine, tearing edge of innovation is in it, which is perceived by average minds as strange and threatening- and the best pieces of Philadelphia Renaissance art are no exception; are, in fact, representative of this phenomenon, because initiated and disseminated from an unlikely locale, at an unlikely time; our very creation myth is an unprecedented one. I consider my own attempts to disseminate Philadelphia Renaissance art, and the myths which inform it, as a kind of humanities experiment over a long period of time. My formulated supposition is not a particularly modest one- that we were, and will likely remain, sui generis in the history of American (and Western) art, and that what we created deserves wide attention and comment.

To get right to a home-truth about the Philly Free School, and how we might be sold and mythologized- we were a clan of younger artists for whom sexual magnetism was no issue- we had it, and used it. We were sexy. Because our sex appeal was is and is backed up by many years of exteriorized sexual behavior, and the many soap operas attendant on this behavior, there is nothing about our lives which would not satisfy a public carnivorous for such exploits. PFS were no slouches about intoxicants, either- our "dissipation skills" were
very well-honed. Even a small amount of research into the bar and club circuit of Aughts Center City Philadelphia will reveal this to be the case. Thus, the mythological antecedents to the Philly Free School artists cannot be the most vaunted haute-culture stalwarts of the twentieth century (with the possible exception of Picasso), who led tame personal lives in comparison (particularly acute with myself in relation to the likes of William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot)- our lifestyle would seem to be more normative for pop culture heroes like The Rolling Stones and Marilyn Monroe. Indeed, PFS's pin-up potentialities are extreme- and, to revise Kenneth Anger, that the Philadelphia Renaissance also included a version of Philadelphia Babylon is not only true for us but obvious and beguiling right on the surface. It's the criss-cross mesh of valuations and sensibilities which creates conflict, cognitive dissonance, and the current American media black-out against us- we were filthy dirty-dealers between the sheets and in our creative exploits, but not literally dealers ourselves, and backed/funded by no power-block family conglomerate; and the obvious debt our art owes to nineteenth century Europe, against post-modern America, also makes for a loopy, jagged, uncomfortable fit with American media and cultural outlet paradigms.

So, the whys and hows of marketing the Philly Free School artists as potential cultural figureheads/icons- with the renegade Stones/Marilyn sex appeal on one side and the European classicist sensibility on the other- are very contorted against the whole process being easy or open to rapid, combustible progression. However, I would not be writing this if I did not believe we have more than a fighting chance of winning out in the end, on all levels- simply because I do have faith that, once the press embargo has ended, a substance-starved American public will "go for us " in a major way. It's an interesting and very singular congeries of circumstances around a group of younger artists- numbers on the Internet indicate strong grass-roots support for us, and the Internet Archive "lock-in," which includes the best of our collective oeuvre, demonstrates some government support as well- while the media black-out against us, in favor of a sleepy and very rote Hollywood/L.A. paradigm, demonstrates the American media's ferocious hatred both of complexities, and of anything extreme, threatening, thoughtful, or generally "new." I have no convincing way of imploring the American press corps to get off their flabby behinds and do anything- its just that the Internet itself has created its own egalitarian power-block against them, which is gaining momentum and brawn, towards a black-out of American public confidence in said press corps. Many sectors around American culture are standing, it would seem, at a Robert Johnsonian crossroads here- and part of the fate of public/cultural America hangs in the balance. I want to state with confidence that, willy-nilly, myths will be made of the Philly Free School and its exploits- our work is already securely set in place, and with enough authority, that the crowds around it will continue to gather, and mythologies beyond my ken establish themselves. Conscious myth-making is what I'm up to here- a risky venture, and one for which middling batting averages, even for the hyper-articulate, are the norm. Yet, if I continue, against this limitation, its because I think that, despite our profligacy, we'd be a decent cultural influence on the United States, and a fine long-term bet as well.
***Painting is “Meeting Halfway” by Abby Heller-Burnham; photo is Adam Fieled and Mary Harju in the Montreal Botanical Gardens in 2003***

***Painting on the cover of the pdf is “The Waiting Room” by Abby Heller-Burnham***
THE WALLS HAVE EARS: NOTES ON AUGHTS PHILLY
ADAM FIELED
NOTES ON THE PHILLY FREE SCHOOL AND
PHILADELPHIA IN THE AUGHTS

About PFS and class- most of us were raised middle-class. The European classicism we espoused, as one component part of our collective aesthetic, does leave us open to accusations of bourgeois interest and prejudice. A hard-line Marxist would have to say that any form of aesthetic classicism is inherently bourgeois. But our demonstrable downward class mobility, inverts this- none of us inherited a serious amount of money, and we all lived hand to mouth in Philly in the Aughts. We were authentically Bohemian- not ashamed, and materially compelled to work retail jobs and occasionally starve. The whole catalogue of our carousing exploits had to happen in this context- and the magic of Philly in the Aughts was that we pulled off these exploits somewhat gracefully and unselfconsciously.

For example, during the years we spent bar-hopping, money for drinks made for an empty fridge at home. If I wanted a midnight snack, it would have to be bread and water. Not to mention that I met Abby and Mary, Mike Land and Nick Gruberg from working retail at the Rittenhouse Square Barnes and Noble in Center City.

Material perks came in and out of our lives- when Abby and Mary were attending PAFA in the early Aughts, each was granted a personal studio. They could both work and crash there. I spent many nights with Mary in her studio, with its checkered linoleum floor and huge bay windows, on Cherry Street. She had a pull-out couch. After PAFA, the pair maintained co-op studio spaces, but never a completely self-run personal studio again.

All of us had good luck with people throwing drinks and drugs at us. The communal vibe in Aughts Philadelphia was very intense; if you were on the inside, and had something worthwhile to offer sexually, socially, or artistically, everyone was encouraged to share their
goods and services. This was especially important for Mary, who was not just a pot-head but a fully fledged pot addict. One truly surprising thing about Aughts Philly is that all the different sectors maintained their own classicist ethos. The Philadelphia Independent offered their classicist form of quirky urban hipster journalism; the Making Time DJs were as classicist as they could possibly be about what they played; and then us. Sharing your intoxicants expressed complicity with both this gestalt sensibility and the will to get trashed beyond it (sometimes.)

Most of us, in Philadelphia in the Aughts, felt an acute sense of being “in” something. I did, but was circumspect about it, and about expressing this "in" from the inside, because I was only intermittently confident that anyone would ever notice us. Owing to a stable, secure body of artistic work having issued from these nexuses, I have more confidence now. This confidence is a compensation for the intense socio-cultural aridity and lethargy of the Recession and 2014 America.

Abs and I were two of the less political Free School artists. For myself, I felt that the variegated life I was leading made its own kind of statement in Bush's America, and I'm sure Abs would say the same, possibly with more emphatic force, owing to gender and "queer" issues. Is that what "On the Other Hand" (affixed to this post) is about?

***painting affixed to post is "On the Other Hand" by Abby Heller-Burnham***
I've been giving a good amount of thought to the cultural chiasmus I perceive to be subsistent between the twentieth and twenty-first century. I've come to some radical conclusions— one is that, to make a long story short, the issue of carnality (fucking, sex) weighs, in the balance of things, for us (Philly Free School) against the show biz pros of the moribund communist regime. My surmise is that, as is not generally known, rock and movie stars, and the wide range of character actors fronting for dope deals both in Hollywood and in American society generally, were and are not allowed to establish or maintain fulfilling sex lives. Babies (including myself) are brought into the world in covert/illicit fashion; and those allowed to create an illusionistic simulacrum of sexuality/fertility on film or onstage are communistically forced to be thwarted against personally engaging in much sexualized outward behavior. Were PFS a bunch of stilted, asexual nerds, and the family we were born out of full of bona fide players, fucking a blue streak in different directions, we would have a substantial problem, no matter how high or "haute" our art was. But, as histories become generally known, and it is seen and internalized that both the fucking and the art are on our side (not to mention the good looks, sans make-up/ornamentation), the cultural twenty-first really will chew up the lame-duck twentieth and spit it out again.

What Mary, Abby, and I had going for a while was a form/manner of "troilism"; and when Mary painted this portrait of me in ’06/’07, for obvious reasons she sculpted a visage half me, half Abby Heller-Burnham. What happened between the three of us was rather devilish (as the portrait indicates), but the entire series of scenes was buoyed up by a good deal of love and affection we had for each other. Leading lives unsullied by contracts with communists, we were allowed to become emotionally and sexually entangled. Staged twentieth century cultural romances, from Scott and Zelda to John and Yoko, look stilted in comparison because, in retrospect, they were obviously just that (staged), and put in motion only to initiate and perpetuate appearances ("fronts.") Historians
who will track the movements of PFS are not going to have to steer around a matrix of obvious, embarrassing discrepancies—both the eye-witness and documentation levels exist right there on the surface. And since Mary's portrait is both titillating and a decent work of art, PFS has a way of fulfilling here the sense of well-rounded and consummate artistry, on every level, which was our ideal.

***painting affixed to post is “Portrait: Adam Fieled” by Mary Harju***
CENTURY DEFINING IMAGE

One of the levels which can be read into Abby Heller-Burnham’s "The Lost Twins" is a sense of menace and/or foreboding around the pursuit of major high art consonance. If the twins are lost, it is because high art appears, in this context, to be frozen into place, ossified into rigid formality, and shrouded in large, long shadows. As of later in the twenty-first century now begun, this may be what art-oriented audiences remember about Abs and I- an age which compelled us to live and create under impinging shadows of hatred, indifference, and supreme mistrust; an age, in fact, so virulently corrupt in relation to the higher arts that many had given them up for dead or drastically, permanently impaired.

The closed circle of twentieth century art significations was, I suspect, set in place to maim/discredit attempts at major high art consonance; yet Abs has the guts here to place those shadows right where they belong- at the center of a composition so tricky, labyrinthine, and thematically rich that it is worth a century's perusal. As a potent symbol of transition between drastically different centuries, "Lost Twins" is par excellence enough to be, and remain, as definitive an art-moment as this century will produce. Abs was a pretty heavy Scorpion when she wanted to be.
If Abby Heller-Burnham's "The Skaters" shares some thematic ground with her "Lost Twins," it has to do at least partly with inheritance - with what the twentieth century bequeathed to the twenty-first. The allegory presented by "The Skaters" is centered on urban decay, specifically the urban decay of fin de siecle Philadelphia, and how a higher artistic sense of the visionary can be both transformative and redemptive. Part of a serious artist's potential brilliance is the fashioning of beauty (especially new modes of formal/thematic beauty) out of unpromising or abased materials - "The Skaters" achieves this by creating a hauntingly desolate ambience, which also comments on the nature of the spectral or spectrality, extending its allegory to include levels and layers of signification around the ineluctable quality of the "meta" in the higher arts to begin with. And she does this, literally and metaphorically, without leaving North Philadelphia.

The superior achievement of Abs against the tiny, crabbed hermeticism of post-modern visual art is this - her circles of signification include theirs' (i.e. she "walks the square" like Bruce Nauman and is as conceptually sound as Nauman or the Neo-Expressionists), but also expands to include narratives of form and formal mastery to create superbly well-rounded ("whole," organic) constructs which chafe against the confines of post-modernism's motivating ethos - easy, anti-humanistic, yearned-for and achieved, nihilistic aesthetic obsolescence. Abby Heller-Burnham's best paintings, despite their shared ambience of desolation and eerie time-suspension, are essentially affirmative, and humanistic, both in their formal/thematic dynamism and in their labyrinthine complexities - and "The Skaters" affirms that a worthy eye ("I") can always fashion something out of nothing (ex nihilo), in any context or socio-aesthetic time-zone.
PHILLY IN THE AUGHTS: BLISSFUL IGNORANCE?

I wrote "A Poet in Center City" in 2012 out of a relatively simple, innocent impulse - to celebrate the many years in the Aughts during which my friends and I enjoyed a fruitful, organic art and social life in Philadelphia. Even in '12, I was blissfully ignorant of the impinging forces whose goal it was to disrupt and destroy our parties and peace of mind. That's part of what makes "Poet in Center City" an interesting document - it recounts moments innocently lived, especially the '04/'05 explosion of the Philly Free School into the Philadelphia art public sphere at the Highwire Gallery on Cherry Street, in the now razed Gilbert Building. With two more years of intense education under my belt, I'm amazed at just how rampant we were allowed to be, against structures which should've toppled us instantly. I have reason to believe that the PFS crowd had a fairy godfather from within "The Family," clearing paths for us; and the sting of it, for our adversaries, was that they were always forced to hold back in (they were led to believe) good faith that we were, in fact, dealers, and that they could take us out eventually. Now, not to pull any punches ten years after the fact in '14 - I believe that most of the core PFS crowd have not survived the Great Recession. But then, most of the L.A./Philly mob have not survived the Great Recession either. I write out of a considerable shadow of darkness. Yet, the "light years" in Center City Philly were just that. The odd juxtaposition, for Abby and I, is that the best of our creative efforts seemed to represent a prescient sense of the darkness which would engulf America almost completely in the Teens. The angle of approach was slightly different between us, and formed a chiasmus - Abs painted her masterpieces right from the passionate, carnal heart of Swinging Philadelphia; I was otherwise occupied and hadn't really hit my creative stride yet.

By the time I struck gold in a meaningful way, and on a level with Abs' best paintings, the Aughts were ending and Swinging Philadelphia was already a memory. That's the last time I had a prolonged interaction with Ms. Heller-Burnham; just as Apparition Poems was beginning to take shape, in late '09. Abs was in a despairing state, and she seemed to feel that her life was already over. I had called her to see if she wanted
to contribute to "Trish," one of the smaller efforts I had going at the time. After all, Abs and I were equally intimate with Mary Harju. Considering our familial connections, it is amusing to me that what happened between myself, Mary, and Abs outdoes, for pure romantic sturm und drang, the supposed shenanigans between the Stones, Anita Pallenberg, and Marianne Faithfull in the late Sixties. I have a hunch that theirs’ was a stooge opera; ours was real, with all circuits operative and fertile. Still, I’m unable to deny that the Recession imposed an ending of misery and desolation on almost all of us, partial or complete- our luck is a sturdy body of first-rate artistic work set in place, which means (and as is rare) that our apotheosis of Bohemia and Bohemian street-life was not for nothing. The pain L.A. must be in (and, in many meaningful ways which are not always obvious, L.A. and Philly are interchangeable) involves the opposite recognition- that, as L.A. is also ripped to shreds by the Recession, the frivolity of L.A. as an enterprise guarantees that it was, in fact, all for nothing in the end, as all the plastic, cheaply made monuments tumble to the ground. That the monuments were all largely constructed as fronts for dope deals makes matters even worse for them- and, as I see what they’ve imposed on my community, over short and long periods of time, I’m sorry not to be able to wish them any better.

***affixed to post is a portrait of Mary Harju taken at her house at 4325 Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia in the early Aughts***
Here's an unlikely juxtaposition which works: Abs and Keats. Both packed a world of worthwhile aesthetic vision and knowledge into a small oeuvre. Abs is rather more extreme than Keats: Keats' major achievements, the "Odes," which redefined Romanticism and opened an
eternal vista onto conceptions of art, artifice, and temporality in chiasmus with them, only fill up (depending on the volume) 10-20 pages. Yet, there's enough middle-weight and minor Keats material to fill up a small, if compact, volume, with introduction, scholarly critique, and endnotes. Abs' position is more precarious- she has JUST THE ODES, little else- no padding, no middle-weight or minor jive to fill things out. So, an Abby Heller-Burnham coffee table book, of the sort that museums like to sell with exhibitions, would seem to be an impossibility.

This syndrome, the JUST THE ODES syndrome, is what I have to work around, and it applies to Mary too, with even more stringency. I'll spend the next five-ten years working intermittently to overcome this obstacle, and continue to sneer, here and there, at who Pablo Picasso was, whose high-points, for me, are no higher than Marys and Abbys, but who diddled off so much treacle, kitsch, and other dross that coffee table book culture around the man is formidable, and profitable for those appealing to the faux-cultural and sort of art-consonant.
CONSCIOUS SEMIOTICS

One thing I picked up, while teaching at Temple, was an awareness of, and insight it, semiotics - the study of cultural "signs" and signage. For some reason, the First Year Writing Department at Temple thought it expedient to use semiotics as a wedge into teaching Freshman Comp. Signs develop their own volition and momentum over time; no one person can control cultural signs that much, collectives are generally determinative. Yet I have made certain decisions as to what I will pursue in crafting "sign" elements into PFS, to the extent that I am allowed. As much as I can be accused, for this particular tactic, of being blatantly manipulative, the basis of my moves will be the literal truth about us, individually and as a group of younger artists. I have no intention of gilding any lilies.

The basic supposition I'm working from is this- not everyone will be seduced by the European classicism of our creative aesthetic, its expressions, representations, and assimilations into different contexts- but PFS has something to offer beyond our art. Just as a liberated social nexus, we were unique- and as a semiotic nuance or detail to fill out the conventional PFS picture, I want us to signify, not a kind of rehashed Romanticism, but a collective willingness to push psycho-sexual dynamics to their absolute breaking point, against social constraints and material imperatives. Just to pursue the ideal of fulfilled, fully explored sexuality (straight and queer), we were willing to walk social tightropes and endure months and years spent riding every form/manner of countercultural edge. If this were mere bravado, I wouldn't dare speak it, with many key Philly Aughts players still alive and willing to talk (and we were by no means the only Philly Aughts sub-group riding this edge.)

Simply put- those who are unable to enjoy our art, may be able to enjoy us, our personalities and shenanigans. That other Philly Aughts sub-groups were just as compelling on this socio-sexual level I would never deny- and Aughts Philly was all about the chaos, agony and ecstasy of colliding social spheres and contexts. As Aughts Philly consolidates itself into a singular, coherent, cohesive semiotic package, it is this sense of collision and sexualized spectacle which is perhaps most salient in distinguishing us.
FORESHORTENED ARROWS

ADAM FIELED
I'm very grateful to have the work I've done in philosophy, as well as literature, locked in on IA. One thing I don't have the capacity to do, which I wish I did, is to discuss Abs and Mary discursively in a high maintenance aesthetics context. I probably have 50-60% of what I need to do the job thoroughly and with authority- but the big chunk of nuanced knowledge which only serious art critics and historians have, and which I do not, assures me that my attempts (and there have been some already) could veer dangerously close to wankery and disrespectful presumption. The little, compressed dialectical pieces I've placed into circulation about Abs were set in place just to get the proverbial ball rolling, and the ball is rolling, sideways/forwards; but, for now, one set of brief aesthetic surmises in Abs' direction is enough.

There are a few foreshortened arrows I wouldn't mind shooting into the air, in this more casual context. I created the Purification Chain as a "compressed matrix" expressing my value judgments about what constitutes both importance and durability in serious art; and the way I configure things, what I call "formal rigor" is ranked above, and adjacent to "invention," in dichotomous balance. Art that is formally rigorous tends to be grounded in history, and art-historical narratives of form and theme; aesthetic forms gain, rather than lose, rigor from intense, ecstatic/agonizing relationships with the forms of the art which precede it; competing histories, and historical narratives, build rigor into artistic forms; and worthy artistic forms embody, comfortably or uncomfortably, both dialectics and "anxieties of influence." Invention is ranked as a Secondary Mode on the Purification Chain, and by a spirit of pure inventiveness serious artists purify their engagements with the rigors of formal and thematic history.

As has been mentioned, I can't discuss this dichotomy in Abs'(or Mary's) work with much authority- through my years spent with them, and some private research, I have emerged as a half-educated intellect, where painting is concerned. What I do want to say is what I see, for whatever it is worth- which has to do with formal elements haunted and "spooked" in Abs' work by an intense immersion in Neo-Classicism, which, metaphorically, "paints her into a corner" from which she can only create her way out by sheer force of will and determination to develop a new aesthetic, and a fully/freshly contemporary one, out of the (French) Neo-Classical impulse; and that feminism and queerness become modes of thematic rebellion for her, towards her invented aesthetic, and against the phallocentric voices which insist on booming through her forms, granting them rigor. Yet, just as formal rigor is "Primary" on the Purification Chain, this combat turning commerce Abs is engaged in may be the most enduring element of her art, with its singular ambience of the spectral and of desolation, perhaps a byproduct of the loneliness of her fight.
painting affixed to post is “Your Move” by Abby Heller-Burnham
Here's a funny story I've never told- the night, in late 2004, when Mike Land and I acted as "roadies" for The Bad News Bats, Abby's band with Liz McDermott. As an initial tangent, I find it interesting that Abby's years with the Bats ('04-'06) coincided with her great period of artistic fecundity. However rough-hewn and hard-edged the Bats' nexus was, Abs felt loved within it. That Liz ran the band with an iron fist didn't seem to disturb this. It's also worth noting that the Bats did get a standard write-up in one of the major Philly weeklies at the time; and that the lovely elfin Bats space cadet was also painting *The Skaters* and *The Lost Twins* then was lost on Mike and I and (I'm guessing) everyone else too. When Abs was painting her masterpieces, she was also playing her cards close to the vest; was, in astrological terms, moon in Capricorning. Had I seen what she was painting, Mike and I would've gone to great lengths to get her to show (as we had shown Mary Harju) at the Highwire Gallery in the now-razed Gilbert Building on Cherry Street, where we were doing our Free School shows. Indeed, the reason we were acting as roadies for the Bats on this particular autumn evening was that we were courting them- we wanted them to do a Highwire show with us in December. Liz was perhaps the greatest empress/tyrant in Philly rock history, so it wouldn't occur to her to just say yes- we had to demonstrate devotion first. So, there we were at the Bats' compound, a few blocks from where they were to play that night (at Tritone, 16th and South.) The first thing I noticed was that Abs was upset about something, and it had to do with Liz. Liz was storming around the house, doing assorted Liz-type tasks; she decided, for example, that Mike and I needed to hear Bukka White. The other two bats, Mary-Beth and Virginia, were lounging around, and were nice enough to share their weed with us.

Once we were properly stoned, and as Mike and I later discussed, we got lost in a labyrinth of insinuations going back and forth between the four Bats. They weren't trying to be insular, but they were naturally, organically insular at the time. When it finally got to be time for us to move the Bats' gear, Liz directed and monitored our movements. Luckily, Mike and I had a good amount of physical stamina, and it wasn't difficult to follow Liz's instructions, especially as the car-ride was short. Nick and Jeremy showed up before the Bats played, and I tried to make some introductions; but Liz was lost in her private maze of secret huddles, pithy debriefings, and symbolic silences. Abs already knew all of us, and Mary Beth and Virginia, both good-natured loafers, were companionable. The Bats onstage were about equally quirky and ferocious in the mid-Aughts; Abs added layers of polish and
sophistication to Liz's she-girl-banshee approach. Tritone was mid-level crowded for the show, and at least one other band played, who I don't remember. I do remember that the Abs/Liz "Glimmer Twins" vibe was intense- they were good at generating tornadoes of energy around them. I also generally noticed, in the last months of '04, and despite the awfulness of the year's election, that something was coming unhinged in Center City Philadelphia- some kind of Pandora's Box had been opened, and the spirit/genie of abandon and the Dionysian in general had been loosed. What redeemed all the casualties which were to come is that whatever glue was holding us together worked- whatever we were in, we were in together. The basic "geist" unearthed was a magnetic one, rather than the repulsive-up-close L.A. vibe around so much advertised American art meshigas. The worst thing you can say about Abs at this time is that she was radically compartmentalized- no one, in relation to the quality of her paintings, knew where they really fit in with her. But in this case, the art so justifies the life, who cares?
As I have now written, Abby achieved her artistic apotheosis during the "el primo" Philadelphia Renaissance years ('04-'06). If I didn't come into my own as a literary artist at the time, what I was producing was better than bits and pieces. My single greatest achievement during those years (for my money) was a poem called "Wittgenstein's Song," which I wrote sitting outside at the Last Drop at 13th and Pine in April 2005:

Merely brilliant is no match
for being intimate. When you catch
a wave that breaks, you can only
half-determine its’ course. Lonely
is the determined man, whether
it’s he who decides his fate or fetters
the world lays on him. This
I learned from a young man’s kiss.
Thus, I’ve learned, said nothing.
To be silent is something
for the wise to practice. Words
go too far. How much have we heard
worth holding onto? How much said
that can placate what we dread?
For once, I actually used a rhyme scheme, a representatively lyric form; and the voice which emerged was meant to be Ludwig Wittgenstein’s, a queer voice (working, also, within the generic confines of the persona poem); a unique poem in my oeuvre, for these and other reasons. The day happened to be sunny; I remember putting my notebook into my back-pack and heading over to Gaetan Spurgin's live-in recording studio at 19th and Carpenter to hang out and get stoned. I knew "Wittgenstein's Song" was a winner but, like Abs, was Capricornish about bringing these things to the surface. One of my tangents at the time was doing a low res MFA in New England; I brought "Wittgenstein's Song" up with me for the summer residency, and debuted it in a workshop context. Carol Frost did complement it, even as my New England adventure that summer is another tangential, tragicomic epic. Another poem I was chipping away at was what was later to become the Apparition Poem about myself and Mary Harju in Montreal in '03:

Wood-floored bar on Rue St. Catharine—
you danced, I sat, soused as Herod,
sipped vodka tonic, endless bland
medley belting out of the jukebox—
you smiling, I occupied keeping you happy,
un-frazzled— suddenly sounds behind us,
the bar wasn't crowded & a patron
(rakish, whisker-flecked big mouth)
lifted a forefinger at beer-bellied
bartender bitching back, soon a real
fight, violence in quiet midnight,
I, scared, got you out of there

but you had to dance, you said,
had to dance so we paved Plateau, tense steps,
found nothing, you started crying & stamping
your feet like a child, I grabbed you & dragged
you back to our room you stripped, curled
into fetal position, beat your fists against
the mattress, in this way you danced
through the night, dozed & woke ready for more—

Mary, it might as well be said, was prone to tantrums (even more so than Abs), and the one she threw in Montreal was particularly horrifying- we were two kids alone in a foreign country, and the logistics of trying to get Mary to a hospital were daunting for me. Luckily, I managed to soothe her out of it. Abs and Mary were both volatile- one reason that the year they spent living together at 42nd and Baltimore (2003) after Mary moved out of 4325 was a patience-trying one for everyone around them, including me.

If I have to offer, in retrospect, some proof that I knew there was a grandiosity and an epic quality to Aughts Philly, even as it was happening, it would probably be "Feel," the "Howl" pastiche I spent two years ('04-'06) working on. Not having gained real, steady competence in inventing literary forms yet, I liked the Ginsberg form (post-Whitmanic) to plug into to tell the story of our lives. If the poem ends in despair and negation, rather than Ginsberg's radical (and shallow) affirmations, it is important to remember that the current ('14) recession was already very much a looming presence in the mid-Aughts; and, as high as we were, the darkness of the American economy's collapse and the Bush/Cheney regime did impinge on our fun sometimes. I debuted the first draft of "Feel" at Molly Russakoff's bookstore in the Italian Market in South Philly not long before I wrote "Wittgenstein's Song," probably March or April '03, with all the main PFS figures in attendance except Mary and Abs. If I recall correctly, that particular reading was rather informal, and hastily thrown together. It
was a rainy, chilly night, and Molly herself was upstairs putting her kids to bed. I also don’t mind saying that, again for my money and despite a borrowed literary form, I do think that "Feel" beats the living hell out of "Howl" for human depth, thematic reach, formal gravitas, honesty consonance, and narrative interest. Too much of "Howl" is candy-corn and baby-mush and the adolescent sense of mythology built into Ginsberg, Corso, and Kerouac grant an infantilizing blemish to their texts and general sense of textuality. Myself, Mary and Abs were adults in our work, always; in our lives, sometimes. It’s another thing linking Abs to John Keats—she did her best, most visionary work while still in her twenties. And, no matter what you might hear, she was not an enfant terrible; she was half of one.

***picture on the cover of “Foreshortened Arrows” is the east wall of the Highwire Gallery, 13th and Cherry St., Gilbert Building, as of the mid-Aughts***
THE PHILADELPHIA RENAISSANCE PT. 2
ADAM FIELED
Introduction

There is a key difference to what I’m doing in a pdf from what the writers of manifestos in the arts generally do. A manifesto is generally written in medias res, rather than after the fact; is written in a boldly declarative style, rather than thoughtfully, scrupulously, and with an eye and ear for raw candor; last, and, perhaps, most importantly, most manifestos aim to separate the artistic cabal they represent from history, while what I am attempting to do for Aughts Philly, the Philly Free School, and the Philadelphia Renaissance in general, is to connect linkages from us to the rich history of the arts, both the fine arts and the popular. A manifesto generally adopts a rhetoric which assigns blame to lax and/or incompetent artistic cabals which have come before, especially immediately before; here, though the tone I adopt towards post-modernism is a niggling one, I respect that no work of art, and certainly no cabal of avant-artists, can be entirely new, or even close. Why manifestos usually fail, and become obsolescent almost immediately after they are written, is that their creators tend to forget this, and claim such an extravagant degree of novelty for themselves that mature audiences will instantly spot the discrepancies between what is claimed and what is accomplished.

Do I make some extravagant claims for the Philadelphia Renaissance and its artists here? I do; but, in contradistinction to a manifesto approach (manifestos are often used as a tease), much of our best art is right here on display. Audiences are encouraged to look at what we have to offer and judge for themselves if we have accomplished anything important, and what that accomplishment may be, or mean. The age of the Internet has its own kind of extravagance, towards allowing an unusual degree of autonomy to creators willing to put time and effort into it. The construction of pdfs in 2014 is very avant indeed; and, over the next twenty to thirty years, we may see more Internet dissemination forms arise which will reinforce and consolidate the gains in autonomy that artists are now beginning to enjoy. It is especially engaging for me to be involved in an avant discipline which offers multi-media possibilities—vistas open to combine prose, poetry, and images in new ways, to (hopefully) create startling and uncanny effects. I do wonder sometimes if people are finding Aughts Philly astonishing; it was certainly an astounding time to live through, for someone raised in such a way as to suggest that finding kindred spirits would be difficult to impossible. But I did find kindred spirits in Aughts Philly; we all did; and the communal vibe was strong enough to grant me a solid backbone of determination and unflagging energy behind it amidst the recessional detritus of 2014.

Adam Fieled 3-11-14
WAYWARD AS SHELLEY: MORE AUGHTS PHILADELPHIA
ADAM FIELED
READING REPERTOIRES: 2000-2004

With or without other PFS constituents, or with PFS adjuncts like Jae Won Chung, Will Esposito, and Christian TeBordo, Philly-lit old guard stalwarts like Jim Cory, Alexandra Grilikhes, and Leonard Gontarek, and at venues which ranged from small-scale, intimate dens like Book Trader while it was still at 5th and South to the Kelly Writers House on the Penn campus (especially during the years I was finishing my degree at Penn), I did readings galore during the first half of the Aughts in Philly. I had a standard repertoire to draw from—the flagship poems were three I had written in State College in ’98—’Clean,’ ‘Prince,’ and ‘Disappear.’ Of the three, ‘Clean’ is the most serious, both formally and thematically:

I gave myself an enema the other day,  
    took some antibiotics.  
Thought to myself,  
    “This is really the poet’s  
place in the world—  
not sitting in some pasture,  
not smoking in some bar,  
not fucking someone lovely,  
not courting Gods or Jesus.

    No.

The poet’s place  
    is kneeling down,  
naked,  
    with something  
or other  
    stuck
up his ass,
in a desperate
attempt
to get
clean.”

The poem can be taken as a queer poem par excellence (though the poem did not originate from queer experience per se), or an allegorical rendering of human frailty generally; and the meta- oratory level of the poem's construction and self-representation hinges it to the metaphysical conceits of Donne, Marvell, and Herbert. Plus, it was amusing enough that I could get a hearty laugh out of almost any crowd with it. "Prince” and "Disappear” were crowd-charmers, too- I had a more than decent show stopping and stealing ratio in those days. Certain nights stand out as extraordinary- one night in early '01, I read at Tritone with Matt Stevenson accompanying me on keyboards. Something clicked, and we achieved a kind of transcendental lift-off, and (I felt at the time) took our audience of 15-20 with us.

The Philly poetry reading circuit in the early-to-mid Aughts was limited, but had some points of interest. The PhillySound poets, ten years older than the wonted tag-team combo of myself and Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum, were very hyped on ruling their own roost, and subjecting all comers to their protocols. They were queer, and well-connected- to institutions like Penn and Temple, the Philly avant-professor crowd (DuPlessis, Perelman, Osman), and to the Poetry Project crowd in New York. Conversely, they viewed themselves as extremely "street,” and prided themselves on writing in a street-consonant way. Their downfall, even then, was a rote and rigid insistence on being treated as absolute aristocrats everywhere they went in Philly. To them, Jeremy and I were parvenu, not worthy to be discussed or (God forbid) asked to read in their La Tazza series. Their version of Philly was South Philly working class, and anti-academic- its just that (as we noticed), because they constantly sought out the patronage of the avant-prof bourgeois to justify themselves, they were also easily dismissed as hypocrites, leeches, liars, and cowards; and by 2005, they were openly aping our moves. Nonetheless, we were always running into them, and C.A. Conrad, their reigning figurehead, worked with me at B & N. The American Poetry Review guys, Steve Berg and his cronies, were also around and, like Philly Sound, were such repellant aristocrats that almost everyone just ignored them.

This liminal period, between This Charming Lab and the major '04-'06 PFS shows, was an interesting one for me- it coincides with the first two years I spent with Mary Harju (2001-2003), and Abs was around us constantly. As all the burgeoning Philadelphia Renaissance characters fumbled youthfully around for direction, most of us had a sense of upward progression- that we were working towards something unique and worthwhile. It was a time of creative gestation for us. To the extent that This Charming Lab was a failed version of PFS, I was gaining competence skills, on different levels, as collateral benefit from the readings we were doing, and the pace of things for all of us was leisureed and comfortable. If my writing then was comparatively directionless, I was still planting creative seeds to bear distinctive, representative fruit later. Final note: Abs took this picture of me at a Radio Eris gig somewhere on Chestnut Street in 2002.
LETTERS TO DEAD MASTERS : THE LAST DROP

As cultural mythologies develop, not just names and bodies of work but places take on a good amount of significance. We cannot think of Picasso and the Cubists without an association with Gertrude Stein's parlor; Byron and Shelley are eternally rogue English ex-pats living on the coast of Italy; and Milton shares his Cambridge, in all its parochial splendor, with Wordsworth. As to what places will be associated with the Philadelphia Renaissance and its key figures, the Last Drop Coffeehouse, at 13th and Pine, should be highly ranked. All of us spent a good amount of time there— with its high, coffered ceiling, large wraparound windows and, in its heyday, earthy green-on-red coloration scheme, it represented our entire sensibility, from imported European classicism to refined American urban hipsterism, and made our socio-sexual instincts tangible. I liked the Drop so much that I set my only extended piece of literary fiction, the novella "Letters To Dead Masters" there. I changed the name from the Last Drop to the Grind (and, oddly enough, there was a "Daily Grind" coffee-shop in Nineties State College), and altered character names, but "Letters" is, among other things, a portrait of what the Drop was like during the years the book was being written (09-'11). By this time, the Philadelphia Renaissance was in limbo mode; many key players were AWOL, and the energy in the Philly arts scene was being drastically weakened by the great recession. Yet, through '11, the Drop remained oddly dramatic- and I wrote the book partly out of the energy generated by the characters there. The protagonist of the book, however, is not me- he shares my literary bent, but lives (as I do not) in a fuzzy, mellow haze, where even deep rumination doesn't have to lead to anything intense; and he isn't particularly sexualized, either, but observes carnality in a detached fashion.

The central, ironic conceit of the novella is that this protagonist is sleepwalking through a series of situations at the Grind in which he has been granted a starring role without knowing it; he registers the fact that he's been used and abused, but always as a disinterested observer; and he alone doesn't understand how disruptive his presence is. We realize, at a certain point, that he
probably wouldn’t care if he did—his imaginative life in invested in communing with literature’s illustrious past heroes, as represented by the English Romantic poets he dictates his epistles to (Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, George Gordon/Lord Byron, William Wordsworth). The characters who pass in and out of his focus from the Drop are mostly non-literary, and represent urban American archetypes—Dana, the cute barrista, is perpetually out to bamboozle, swindle, seduce, and dramatically engage him. As a synecdoche of indie-world, she feels that the Grind is her turf, and that this irritatingly vague protagonist needs to play by her rules. The punk band who hang out at the Grind, the Fugazi Fighters, are companionable to him up to a point; he represents no ostensible threat to them; but they, too, eventually become frustrated by Dana’s obsession with him; as do the resident DJs; and as does Tibby, the Grind’s token would-be fiction avant-gardist. What gives "Letters" its’ heft are, in fact, the protagonist’s ruminations; pitched to a very specific frequency, between the exuberance of the Philly Renaissance years and the entropic misery of the early Teens:

Percy,

In December 1915, Picasso wrote a missive to Gertrude Stein which begins, “my life is hell.” The world was largely a charnel ground, then and now. And as you live through the decomposition of an empire, you realize that everything gets burnt, nothing is spared. But then, I wouldn’t be having these thoughts if I watched television. It is an opiate for the masses on an unforeseen scale; a thought-repellent that guarantees, like certain sedatives, a good night’s rest. What do I do between 7 and 11? Nothing— I look at the walls, note how shadows start creeping with greater and greater rapidity in August, then try to ignore the light created by the top of the utilities building across the street (as it flashes the time, temperature, advertisements, etc). That kind of time, raw time, filled by interior realities rather than exterior ones, has been losing ground for sixty years. That’s why the academics can never be too penetrating about someone like Beckett; you’ve either lived with raw time or you haven’t. It doesn’t have to be a lazy wallow—all kinds of surprising connections manifest, as your mind creeps out into the universe. Who knows, you might think; maybe there are races of beings out there who’ve subsisted for 200 billion years. They probably perceive us to be spoiled babies. If you choose to stay grounded, you may have the realization that each of your lovers secretly hates you. The application of a non-palliative becomes palliative just in itself—you feel subtle currents run through you, moving you towards some kind of totalized realness. Throw in kids and a wife, and you can forget about raw time; on this level, I still savor bachelorhood. A conventional situation will never do for me; I have no idea how I’ll be permitted to configure these things.

Talking about conventional situations, I got to the Grind early today, in order to give me some time with Picasso unimpeded; across from me sits Reed, who fronts a large jazz-rock band in the mold of the Weather Report. He’s got on a Gilligan hat, and a black vest over a blue polo; he’s working at his laptop. This guy is my friend on Facebook, and I’m on his e-mail list. After we exchange brief nods, I realize he’s lost about fifteen pounds since I last saw him. He’s either four or five years younger than me, I’m not sure. But he carries himself with the affected assurance of the eternal up-and-comer; the one who always wants to tell you, boy have I got plans; and this time (for once) there’s no looking back. Truth be told, I was in this position for many years; I’ll never forget that claw in my stomach that always said the same thing—something remains unproven, and you may or may not be able to prove it. That’s the
arts—a high school with few graduates. And if you’re a poet, you can graduate and stay broke. To be Darwinian, I’ve got all the varsity “Vs” I need, and this guy doesn’t. All the same, I wish him the best. Especially as there aren’t too many graduates in Philly, and our version of “Arts High” is the inverse of Ridgemont—slow-paced and dull.

Yours,

Adam

An "epistolary" novel (or novella) is one in letters; as a literary form, an epistolary novel, when well executed, can create a sense of warmth and intimacy; I think "Letters" achieves this. The hot-house which was the Last Drop in Aughts Philly deserves to be brought into this charmed textual circle of warmth and intimacy— it is a place we all felt warmly about. It encompassed everything we were with grace, and charm.
ICONICITY, HALF-ART, AND THE PHILADELPHIA RENAISSANCE

The Biblical commonplace of the term "false idol," and its significations, is pertinent as a tangent to the Philly Free School, the Philadelphia Renaissance, and what we were attempting to achieve in Aughts Philly. If I call the entire twentieth century an era of false idols, or false icons, it is because the drastically reduced profile of major high art consonance in said century created a cultural vacuum largely filled by popular culture entertainment business professionals, whose version of art I call "half-art," and whose manufactured iconicity filled an expanse of the Western cultural public sphere much better filled, as it may be in this new century, by the likes of us. The stock-in-trade of the twentieth century’s false idols- what I call "half-art"- has, as a constituent structural feature, an imperative to fulfill of finding a way to appeal to the lowest public common denominator, while remaining representatively somehow "artistic" enough to satisfy at least part of the educated populace as well. Rock music, as a popular art form, and at its highest levels, seemed to work from this premise, and the manufacturing of rock music icons initiated the profile of the consummate "half-artist"- a figure thoughtful enough, in their life and work, to appear wise and/or venerable; but whose cultural expression remained crass enough, and uninformed by the history of serious art enough, to be easily comprehensible to broad masses of people, thus insuring both wide, continued interest and substantial profit margins. There is a utility value to half-art, and half-artists; engaging their work does not require an educated cultural background, and half-art grants the unrefined a handle on having at least some culture. But the abasement of the late twentieth century consisted of the fact that Western culture had lost all impetus to anything but half-art, and half-artists- they were granted an extremely inordinate amount of cultural power and prestige.
Part of the issue was what was happening in the higher arts themselves- the insipid vacuity of the movement called "post-modernity" created a congeries of circumstances which suggested that even would-be high artists were working to make high art obsolescent. They not only made a fetish of half-artists; they indicated with the chips they put down, on what could be permanent and durable, that half-art would triumph over serious, passionately engaged high art. Popular culture was made to appear formidable and substantial, in a false light; that it could be a hinge to the forms of advanced cognition which inhere in serious high art, and serious pursuit of the humanities in general. All of the major figures of the Philadelphia Renaissance were raised on half-art, and its pantheon of false idols—many of us were even fervent believers, in our youth, of these all-purpose mind-toys. Yet, what the arrival of PFS as a cultural influence in America creates is a novel, unexpected, and very potent power-block— a generation of educated, accomplished, manifestly historically aware and major high art consonant artists, who are (surprisingly) attractive and entertaining enough (in the romanticism of their lives/adventures) to satisfy half-art/ pop culture imperatives too; and who are more worthy of iconic status than anything the second half of the twentieth century had to offer, from Elvis and Bruce to Warhol and Ashbery.

On another level, and strictly speaking, very few human beings deserve to be made icons— it is often forgotten that the etymology of the word "icon" is religious, and used in conjunction with figures who have manifested miracles, and who devoted their lives to aiding mankind on the most profound spiritual levels. By granting, say, Madonna iconic status, the twentieth century confessed many things— grounding in a pagan, primitivized form of secularism, which inverted frivolity and gross exhibitionism into religious virtue; a maintained state of absolute spiritual emptiness; a sense that it was permissible to let the public sphere be run without any undue responsibility to the general public; and a patina of prolonged semantic insensitivity, which reduced discourses to buzz-words and catch-phrases. Applying these complexes to us, the American press corps has only the most abysmal reasons for ignoring PFS— in many ways, we were (and are) everything they despise all at once. America in general is unused to anything but half-art; and we are aesthetic whole-hogs. What I want to propose, in 2014, is that an American populace, weathered and chastened by the recession, may be ready to move culturally beyond false idols and half-art— ready for the genuine ("whole") article, and from within the United States. The half-art level of PFS is supplied by our personalities and biographies— the narrative of our lives, which in Aughts Philly was outrageous enough to make more than decent pop culture fodder. After a certain point, the body of work we’ve created is strong and varied enough that some press corps will have to pick us up, American or not; and a twenty-first century narrative initiated, against the juvish twentieth century master narrative, in all its bought-out aridity, which will make clear just how fulsome we were.
One quirk which made Aughts Philly interesting is that most of the Philadelphia Renaissance players, while they made little or no effort to court mainstream media attention, did display a penchant for exhibitionistic behaviors, postures, and attitudes. The immediate mea culpa is branded right on my "I am as wayward as Shelley" tee-shirt, made for me by my second wife Melissa in early '01. This contradiction - a flair we all had for dramatic self-presentation, while also maintaining a stubbornly independent streak which made it seem a sell-out to us to appeal to the
press to legitimize our work- fueled the collective fire of Aughts Philly, towards greater and greater demonstrations of gonzo sangfroid. Mike and I got lucky at/with the Highwire Gallery, who helped us take our PFS shows there to the highest possible level of gonzo extremity; as long as we provided the booze (including, owing to our outrageous desire to get PFS audiences off, not only wine and beer but bottles of cheap whiskey and vodka), the Highwire curators brought treats for us- twice, a functioning nitrous tank, and once, hash brownies.

Congealed into this context, everyone brought their own gonzo predilections to the proverbial table- with Nick Gruberg, it had to do with a nuanced, broadly philosophical drunken professor role he liked to play. With Sir Gruberg plumbing (or spelunking) deep into his cups, out mosied discursive ramblings (Nick, remember, graduated with honors from U of Chicago) meant to establish his complete and total intellectual superiority to you, whoever you thought you were or might be. And let it not be said that Nick and Mike Land didn't perform what seemed to be rehearsed routines- Nick abuses Mike; Mike knocks back a bunch of shots and leaves the table, exasperated (this often happened at McGlinchey's); Mike returns to the table, and Nick begins abusing Mike again; they both slam back more shots; Jeremy finds a way of annoying both of them, and they begin abusing him; Jeremy plays pater, and does his "now, now, children..." routine, which they pointedly ignore, exasperating Jeremy; by the time we hit 15th Street again, we'd be so comically rambunctious that no one could remember who was abusing who, or why; then, off we'd go to somebody's house party, and more variations of the same.

Abby and Mary were rambunctious on a different level- when Mary wanted to make an impression, which she usually did, her moves were all Grace Kelly, "ice-queen vogue"; its just that Mary and I were often all over each other in public, because this was Aughts Philly and that's just the way we felt, babes. As has been said before, but bears repeating, Mary had it, where sexual magnetism was concerned- when she entered a room, gallery opening or not, she reached out to find everyone's sex buttons, and pressed them, then waited for the fireworks to start. They usually would, and did. Poor Abs was gorgeous, but tiny, and couldn't always keep up; yet few of us were unfamiliar with the sight of Abs moving in for the kill, with the right kind of girls and boys; including me, the night Abs and I spent dirty dancing upstairs at the Khyber in early '05. I would be lying if I said there wasn't a level of let's see her be Grace Kelly about this for both of us; facts are facts, Mary could be actively sadistic as a seductress. As predicted, Mary did find my early '05 affair with Abs outrageous- but it was karma she earned. That's why, when I saw the movie "Closer," I laughed- welcome to Mary-land. Was she also a complex character beyond all the overblown seductiveness? Yes she was- or Abs and I wouldn't have bothered to endure all her garbage. As for Nick Gruberg's garbage, that's one split which, by the end of the Aughts and for most of us, was unavoidable- though I know "gonzo" wasn't his whole life (he started grad school for linguistics roughly when I began with my University Fellowship at Temple), that's all, after a certain point, he would condescend to show us Aughts Philly stalwarts.
In retrospect, what was gonzo about Aughts Philly in general was how individualistic all of us were - a bunch of forces coalesced and made it possible for us to write our own rulebooks and define ourselves and our self-mythologies any way we damn well pleased. We had more real freedom than any other group of artists in American history - some of it we had to fight for, some we did not. One of our freedoms was the right to be extreme, and to live dangerously - and we did both with aplomb. Had we been exposed to media fangs at a young age, much of this freedom would've been taken from us, and replaced with bogus imperatives and pointless restrictions. I'm very glad and grateful Aughts Philly didn't happen this way; as the slow-burn towards all that media biz begins now. As a final note: the affixed pic was taken at a cafe on Avenue A in Manhattan's East Village in October '05 by Amy King.

***on the cover of this pdf is a picture taken of Mary Harju at her house at 4325 Baltimore Avenue in West Philadelphia in the early Aughts***

**Pure Reasons:**

*Essays/Critiques/Philadelphia*

*Adam Fieled*
As much as I was, and am, a participant in the Philadelphia Renaissance, there is something to me very inscrutable about it—probably because, as an organic conglomeration of socio-aesthetic energies (rather than a calculated, “bought out” bid to occupy cultural and commercial space), its movements (backwards, forwards, and sideways) are unpredictable, even loopy. Thus it was that by 2009, my attitude towards Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Renaissance had undergone many modifications. Because I was moving up in the ranks as a heavily published and publishing avant-garde poet (my first print full-length text had come out through Otoliths in 2007), and was doing so with no particular support from the university whose fellowship was largely funding me (Temple), I was in a very ambiguous social position. The cohesive, “Highwire” mid-Aughts form of PFS had collapsed; Mary and I united again for ’07 and then separated by ’08; I had largely lost touch with Abs. The Philly avant-profs seemed undecided as to whether I should be recognized by them or not; by this time, I was not only publishing alongside them, but when a lengthy review of my second print book appeared in Jacket Magazine that summer, it seemed to me that I had brokered a high enough position for myself that I would be fine, thank you, with or without their sanctimonious blessings. The popular series I had going on my blog Stoning the Devil at the time, regarding “post-avant” as a possible movement in poetry, confirmed this—I figured prominently in dozens of high-level theoretical online arguments, and my name was being used in conjunction with many older poets, from established generations.

Then, by August, my final hook-up with Abs coincided with the beginning of my second fellowship year. I didn’t have to teach, and had already passed the dread comp exams, which did its sometimes wonted task of upping my IQ. As I prepared to move my writing into interstellar overdrive, it was difficult not to notice that the rich personal life I had enjoyed all through the Aughts had dissipated into a fragmentary state. Mary, against everyone’s advice and wishes, had left Philly to do an MFA in New York; but we corresponded, and she left comments on my blog with some frequency. The absence of Mary, Abs, and the other PFS characters left a vacuum in my life, now filled by a rigorous dedication to forging ahead on all fronts as a writer and theorist. What I wanted to do was to expand the Apparition Poems section of my Blazevox e-book *Beams* into a full-length manuscript, and to do this by broadening the parameters of what could be called an Apparition Poem. I noticed the poems getting richer, more assured, both formally and thematically, towards an attempt at the timelessness I loved in Keats’ Odes and sonnets:

#1241

Why does no one tell the truth?
Because the truth is (more often than not) absurd. No one wants
to look absurd, so no one tells the truth, which creates even more absurdity; worlds grow into self-parody, systems grow down into gutters, whole epochs are wasted in perfidy; Cassandra finally opens her mouth, no one listens, they want her to star in a porno, set her up with a stage-name, she learns not to rant, visions cloud her eyes, cunt —

#1130

Despite what I write, there’s not much sex in the world — walk down Walnut Street, take an inventory — how much sex are these people getting? This one fat, this one ugly, this one old, this one a baby, a couple married twenty years, or ten, or five — not much sex in these lives. But media, movies thrive on representing this tiny demographic: single, young, promiscuous. Crowds come.

All through September and October, an eerie feeling hung in the air around me, and around Center City in general- a sense of something misplaced, and of energies moving in strange subterranean directions. For two weeks in November, Philly enjoyed unusually warm weather- I couldn’t write, and suffered a minor nervous breakdown- strange visions of grisly murders, alternating with a sense that Center City was suffering a major, unwanted L.A. invasion; and that many of my new acquaintances were stooges of one form or another. If blood had been spilt around me, I hadn’t seen it- but, by late ’09, I felt it intuitively.

By Thanksgiving, my feet touched earth again; and that’s when Apparition Poems really started to take shape, especially when I hit the twin towers of the collection:
terse as this is, it is
given to us in bits
carelessly shorn
from rocky slopes,
of this I can only
say nothing comes
with things built in,
it's always sharp edges,
crevices, crags, precipice,
abrupt plunges into 'wants,
what subsists between us
happens in canyons lined
in blue waters where this
slides down to a dense
bottom, I can't retrieve
you twice in the same
way, it must be terse
because real is terse,
tense because it's so
frail, pine cones held
in a child's hand, snapped.

Two hedgerows with a little path
between — to walk in the path like
some do, as if no other viable route
exists, to make Gods of hedgerows
that make your life tiny, is a sin of
some significance in a world where
hedgerows can be approached from
any side — I said this to a man who
bore seeds to an open space, and he
nodded to someone else and whistled
an old waltz to himself in annoyance.
I discovered then that the ghastly view from my studio apartment at 23rd and Arch (I looked out at parking lots, billboards, and the big black PECO Utilities Building) could be improved by bringing down my slatted shades, which created a "noir" effect and made these winter months (and those in years to follow) more bearable. This is also the specific moment when I discovered online the cache of masterpieces which Abby Heller-Burnham had left through the Aughts- I republished many of them on Stoning the Devil instantly, and hailed Abs as the genius she was. Abs by that time was haggard, and ten sheets to the wind- I don't think she noticed, and if she did notice I doubt she would've cared. The cumulative weight of this congeries I called "visionary deadness"- built into it, the allure of states of decomposition and decay, the macabre, and the fight to survive in a blasted landscape. The recession by this time was entrenched, and bearing down on all of us. As of four years later, many of us still occupy this space, as we wait for some sun to peak out from behind the clouds; though we also know that states of decomposition and decay can make for more than decent art, as Abs foretold in a prescient way in the mid-Aughts.
GET WITH THE PROGRAM : CONTEXT AND THE PHILADELPHIA RENAISSANCE

As of 2014, the contextual situation around the Philadelphia Renaissance, the Philly Free School, and Aughts Philly is an intriguing story in itself. Of all the contingencies which could destabilize culture and cultural contexts, the Internet has to be one of the most contentious; if used properly, it can grant an unprecedented amount of freedom, autonomy, and expressive power to savvy cultural auteurs; yet, in doing so, it thwarts mainstream media outlets and their overseers, who desire a certain amount of hegemonic power over the collective psyche of the American populace. Because the Internet has developed a good deal of upward momentum over mainstream media outlets, the national psyche, and the American cultural scene to accompany it, now subsist in a fractured, uncomfortable state of imbalance, exasperated and exacerbated by the deprivations of the recession. Innovations in methods/modes of dissemination of cultural data- in this case, the Philadelphia Renaissance pdfs which, now securely locked into Internet Archive, have given us whatever name and status we have- have no echo in possible innovations set in place by the mainstream media and their repositories. In short, the Internet has given us (and everyone) the opportunity to successfully, painstakingly and artfully "go rogue." To the American press corps, PFS cannot be anything/anyone but rogues- our terrain, aesthetically and on socio-sexual levels, is unfamiliar and hostile to them, our methods/modes of dissemination not germane. It also needs to be noted that high art/"haute" movements are generally not given much air-time in America; after the Abstract Expressionists, the Beats, and Warhol's Factory (all drilled into public consciousness decades ago), we've seen very little along these lines, and been asked to accept and embrace a pop culture world of dopey L.A. actors, rock half-artists, and various demagogue smarm-fests.

In fact, the media problems PFS faces are much more extensive than this; if there's a reason you won't find Abs (affixed to this post is her "The First Real Top") in "Modern Painters" or "Art in
America," its because these publications are largely fraudulent fronts for rich families and business interests, using post-modern and other art instrumentally. The Internet era has hit these old-school art publications very hard, and they generally can't be found anywhere but at centralized urban Barnes & Noble anyway. As we're on our way up, they will be on their way down; as will cornball century XX staples like the New York Times, the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, and the Nation, for whom the sublimity of Apparition Poems is anathema and the tininess of the pantheon of faux-entrenched American poets, in all their blatant and total inferiority to Apparition Poems, the kind of business-oriented commodity they want to sell. These are all closed fortresses; and they are now largely Fortresses of Solitude for aging Culture Lite and Business-Culture Supermen. We will win and they will lose; but as long as they continue to occupy some cultural space in America, a totalized picture of fragmentation, non-cohesiveness, and cacophonous incoherence will be difficult to avoid. The light in the darkness PFS, and the Philadelphia Renaissance in general, has to shine is intense, but also strange, uncanny, and warped towards a sense of mystery- how and why we did what we did is strange and uncanny, and odd fodder to set alongside not only the Reese Witherspoons of the world, but the C.D. Wrights and the Jeff Koons. We lived as captives of the depths, and the deep- even our happiest moments of expansion had some depth in them- even our bacchanals. So, as we roll up on America's collective psyche, the context around/of this confrontation is, as the Brits would say, bloody odd; perhaps the oddest single confrontation in American history. Philadelphia itself, under close long-term scrutiny, is extremely odd- and it is poetic justice, once Philadelphia is profoundly seen, for America that this is where we're calling from. Sometimes, in human history, the truth will out.
PFS and Boomerism

The Baby Boomer generation in America were, and are, very funny about education, high art, and the humanities. Many, perhaps most, were weaned on notions of the sufficient adequacy of pop culture to represent culture in general, and cultural diversity- and their generational narrative, while heavy on pop culture iconicity (Bob Dylan and the Beatles, for example), is short on the kind of humanities achievements which stand a reasonable chance of becoming enduring monuments for the human race. This set of values and value judgments is what they passed along to us- along with some deliberately mixed signals as regards high art, the humanities, and education. The Boomer jive-talk around the higher arts, specifically, does a neat card trick movement towards proving the impossibility of pursuing high art in this country; and disavowing the entire rich history of high art into the bargain. The first card trick move is simple- if you bother to get an arts education, if you bother to learn in-depth the history of your art, and if you have the degrees to prove it, then that makes you an academic, man, and thus ineligible to create serious art yourself. Look, they say collectively, at Bob Dylan- he's their paradigm model (especially Boomer media sources) of the archetypal American artistic genius. His (they say) raw, untutored, and free-wheeling lyrical genius expressed the tensions, frustrations, and will-to-socio-political power of a whole generation (man)- all books and formal training would've done is bog him down in the namby-pamby cowardice and pointlessly ornate armature of Olde Europe.

Yet, to make a too-long story short, Dylan sucks- his lyrics can't stand as
serious poetry, next to Apparition Poems on one side, and Eliot, Yeats, and English Romanticism on the other; even as song lyrics, their lack of discipline and often laughable incoherence rank him behind Mick Jagger, Lou Reed, and others of his peers; and the quality of his melodies is not particularly superior, even in a rock music context. That is, of course, leaving his voice out of the equation. But back to the Boomer card trick (a kind of Satanic inversion of Anselm's Ontological Argument)- we've established that seriously educated people are instantly and forcefully disqualified from being serious artists- yet, if you want to pursue anything in a high art context, you have to have some kind of education, man. You can't be uneducated and just paint, or write poetry, or novels, or sculpt. You can see how the Boomer card trick winds up in a double-bind- anyone who seriously tries to pursue high art is either too educated, or not educated enough to do so. So, here's the solution, say the Boomers- don't pursue the higher arts. No one ever faults Bob Dylan and Paul McCartney for not being educated enough- and the cognitive demands imposed by haute culture are just too heavy, man.

In totem, the cultural ground this generation gained in the late twentieth century has been, and remains, extremely ill-occupied- the simulacrum of serious art, rather than the genuine article, and always (after the Eighties) wrapped in a sentimental, sentimentalizing, self-congratulatory package. PFS clearly did not, and do not, buy their card trick swindle in regards to education and the humanities- it is grounded in fear, naivete, narcissism (collective and personal), and such extraordinary cognitive laziness that even to grant them fully human status seems a stretch after a certain point. The Baby Boomers are, and have largely always been, brats and little monsters. They've now had several decades to meaningfully distinguish themselves, and have failed to do so. If PFS has been able to turn the tables on their Rolling Stone magazine level mentality, it is because too many people born after the Sixties have noted how very vapid and vacuous their whole generational mold and paradigm-set is; and the task of deconstructing what's left standing in America during and after the recession is our task at hand.

***attached painting is by Abby Heller-Burnham***

***pdf cover is Mary Harju, taken by Adam Fiedel at the Montreal Botanical Gardens in 2003***
Dark Euphoria: Philadelphia as Context and Content
Adam Fieled
FIT AUDIENCE THOUGH STRANGE: SKIPPING STEPS, SUBLIMITY, AND PFS

The manner in which Schopenhauer defines “sublimity” - an aesthetic object which simultaneously seduces and threatens the human will - is as good a starting point as any for attempting to come to grips with the body of artistic work left by the Philly Free School. In the paradigm shift from post-modernity to new modes of self-consciously high art, we skipped several steps - the most obvious step skipped being representations of the merely beautiful or charming, as (again) defined by Schopenhauer. By building sublimity into “The Lost Twins,” here shown, Apparition Poems, and the rest, we assured ourselves a reaction from beleaguered post-modernists, of extreme fear, mistrust, and loathing - and, for all the positive wheels turning around us, their continued and continual silence in our direction signifies this extreme fear, mistrust, and loathing.

“The Lost Twins,” in particular, manifests so many levels of sublimity that it seems impossible that Abby should’ve painted it, even in Aughts Philly, against an aesthetic back-drop which not only devalued (and devalues) painting, but one strictly focused on what I might call, as a legitimate inversion, the anti-sublime - ironic conceptual jokes, cloying politically correct installation art which aims to press all the most facile, cozy PC-consonant buttons; video art, fanciful and Dada-esque in its execution, which, underneath a patina of artistic daring, plays to the self-congratulatory peanut galleries of curators, investors, and art press bound by a play by the po-mo rules mentality.

Make no mistake - Schopenhauer’s sublime is menacing - and, by daring to be a menace, and one not to be lightly dismissed on any level, Abs guaranteed herself an indefinite media/gallery/museum quarantine. That is, perhaps, one reason Abs sees her twins as “lost” - they dare to engage painting in all its primal and primordial (sublime) splendor - and, as voyeurs to their voyeurism, we overhear their overhearing what the illustrious past of painting has been, and how stranded in the darkness of ignorance it has become - devalued by charlatans, perpetuated by tepid
quacks, shrouded in the chiaroscuro of an uncertain future.

“The Lost Twins,” in fact, may be taken as a dazzlingly complex self-portrait, of an artist not menaced into silence by depth, shadow, and thematic complexity. If anything in the 20th century compares, including Picasso, I am not aware of it and have not seen it. Abby’s sublimity has a brick wall quality, the implacable quality of a work of resolutely high art, which compromises nothing to a desire to please or sell.

The parallelism between myself and Abby is profound—in terms of pendulum-swinging, from the dross of thoughtlessness and post-modern cliche to the loftiest, most cognitively challenging form of high art, Apparition Poems enacts the same kind of internal drama that “The Lost Twins” does. Apparition Poems has received reviews, but none which evince any critical authority—if the book is to be reviewed by critics with no thorough knowledge of Keats and Wordsworth, or even Yeats and Eliot, then it is easy to get the feeling of what the losses imposed by post-modernity on literature are. A typical literary critic, from this context, can’t put Apparition Poems in any perspective, can’t see it clearly or begin to define its parameters in an original way, formally or thematically; in short, the English-language literary critics in 2014 other than myself are largely cretinous imbeciles; and the scholars, lost in pointless, meandering digressions and perfunctory quote gathering, are not much better.

One thinks of Milton’s “fit audience though few” paradigm, and us, and is then hit on the other side of it by the fact that we do have some visibility and popularity—our work securely (and, truth be told, glamorously) locked into place on Internet Archive, high numbers for our books and pdfs all over the Net. It’s an awkward situation, man...very awkward indeed. By pole-vaulting over the ridiculous and into the sublime, and not making any concessions to the ridiculous, PFS has created an extended moment and a socio-aesthetic context so stark and challenging that, for the time being, only the venturesome may approach us in good faith. I invert for us, Milton’s paradigm into: “fit audience though strange.”

Adam Fieled 2014
PFS AND THUG-ISM

For PFS, as a collective, to cut through the blarney, all the blarneying levels of post-modernity as a construct, we chose a tack of extremity, extreme disobedience-enlightened elitism/classicism, expressed with edges left in of doubt, foreboding, ghostly/apparitional presences, which accrued to all of us as we ploughed through the Aughts in Philadelphia. It's not just that, as has previously been stated, we skipped intermediate steps from post-modern comic auto-destruct modes to our own version of centuries-encompassed-from-America apotheosis - the lot of us, individually and together, were little thugs, and, in an ironic fashion, the "thug" image of Philadelphia in the American press does work for PFS. Elitist/classicist/thug-ism- that's a new one for the American art scene to deal with, and one which (to my knowledge) has never been seen in America before.

Dovetailing with this, it needs to be said, for those who care-despite the non-encumbrance of socio-sexual and socio-aesthetic freedom in Aughts Philly, the landscape we inhabited was not without violence. That's one constituent level of the PFS aesthetic which should make New York cringe, whether they then opt to turn away or not- the edge expressed around carnality, where sex and death manifest simultaneously, and the urgency around carnality and its contexts carries with it darkling undercurrents of physical violence, murder, mayhem, and the dissolution of boundaries which renders these things cognitively discrete.

If I stand like a thug behind our collective thug-ism, it's because the elitism/classicism built into our creations' formality and formal renderings in general leant (and lends) the entire PFS enterprise enough elegance and starkly imaginative gorgeousness that whoever in the United States elects to butt their heads against our brick walls will probably lose a substantial amount of blood. The whole broke-down contextualization of PFS might be a joke if we weren't also funnier than Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, Andres
Serrano, Bruce Nauman, Judy Chicago, Miranda July, and the rest of the semi-serious New York joke crew, who (their master narrative runs) make us laugh to ourselves in our despair, or make us laugh now to despair later, but may have to face a long-term socio-historical prognosis of cat-calls and thrown tomatoes, from a Campbell's soup can or not.

Another important level of awareness, for those interested in PFS, and the unique congeries of contexts around us, socially and sexually-PFS, and, in fact, all the major Philadelphia Renaissance sectors, were as completely and totally "street" as we could possibly be. We weren't watching Philly street-life from the sidelines and taking notes-most of us spent most of the Aughts on the front-lines. By the time I wrote Apparition Poems, the vitality of Aughts Philly street-life was receding into entropy and atrophy-but the book, nonetheless, is a reaction to a decade spent living in the street, as it were-and doing so by maintaining at least some thug-level street-smart survival skills, against the dealers, imposters, and clowns who perpetually threatened me, and us.

In fact, given how tight certain restraints are on Philly street-life, it is amazing to me that we were granted a solid decade to play around in. I did feel, especially in the early Aughts, a sense of being personally charmed- that when I walked and rode the Philly streets, a beneficent cosmic force was covering me, encasing me in a kind of shield—nothing could hurt me or touch me unless I wanted it to. I was young, of course, and wrong- but standing at the corner of 13th and Ellsworth in South Philly at 2 am, or walking home at dawn from Nemon Buckery's Halloween party on 49th Street to 21st and Race, that sense of being guarded was acute. Abs, Mary, Jeremy, all seemed to feel the same way— and we would hit the streets, go anywhere and do anything. Had we not been thugs, or at least partly carried ourselves as such, I'm sure someone would've killed us, and PFS, before we began; and there's nothing soft about our body of work, either.

***the affixed shot of Adam Fieled was taken at the Eris Temple in West Philadelphia in 2010***
PFS and Exclusivity

Organized culture certainly has some obnoxious aspects, one of which is the clannish instinct by which groups of artists segregate themselves in an exclusive fashion, creating charmed circles bound together by closed circuits. When Gaetan Spurgin and I were doing the This Charming Lab shows in 2000, which we both found disappointing, Gaetan complained (and I agreed at the time) that the Philadelphia cultural mentality had to do with establishing a clan and then huddling together for warmth in a corner; Philly artists, and art-groups, were lousy at self-transcending and working together towards shared goals. This Charming Lab, in retrospect, was a warm-up for and way-station towards PFS and the Highwire Gallery shows of the mid-Aughts— I was learning effective, competent event-planning piece by piece, and also gaining competence skills at juggling artists’ demands and egos. That having been said, most of the This Charming Lab shows, though staged at decent venues (Khyber, Dobbs, Killtime Warehouse), were pretty tepid, and felt hollow to me. By the time PFS established itself in the mid-Aughts, some characters remained the same (Matt Stevenson and Gaetan were still around), but most of the TCL crew had to be dropped. The price I paid for
making This Charming Lab non-exclusive is that everyone signed on to pursue their own agenda, rather than enacting the co-op set-up I hoped would manifest; and, rather than huddling in a corner for warmth, everyone claimed our corner for their own and went out of their way to thwart, hoodwink, and one-up everyone else.

Fast-forward four years— the PFS shows are underway at the Highwire Gallery. The four-person management system in place (me–Mike–Jeremy–Nick) was unique; but, on a day-to-day basis, it was really myself and Mike Land exerting the most strenuous efforts and pulling the boldest, foxiest moves to make the shows (and the general PFS scene) happen. My management skills by then were well-honed; and, because I’d gained the requisite skill in ego-juggling, the shows often took the form of hyper-aesthetic three-ring circuses. Were we exclusive? The weird riff on this form of PFS and exclusivity is that Mike and I especially went out of our way to demonstrate an expansive sensibility in our PFS-related dealings; nevertheless, the four of us together on the bar circuit was so unique an admixture of looks and temperaments, that our very collective magnetism could be repulsive, and we, as a social nexus, wound up effortlessly excluding anyone in our path who couldn’t deal with four highly educated, tall, thug-ist, brown haired, brown eyed, highly sexed, promiscuous, non-dealing, straight-shooting aesthetes with a penchant for seduction, fast action, bacchanalian reverie, and general impetuous combustibility.

As needs be made clear, neither Abs nor Mary knew themselves to be “PFS” artists; I stuck the label PFS on my Aughts friends and lovers, to make clear both the coherence, on aesthetic levels, and the cohesiveness of what was created among us in Aughts Philly. Now that PFS has migrated from the Highwire, four-guy orientation to Adam–Abs–Mary–Jeremy (retaining half-integrity in the process, or two-thirds; Abs and Mary both had some Highwire involvement), I have to say that it is difficult not to disclose a revelation of pure, unadulterated artistic exclusivity in what/who is being represented—the enlightened elitist/classicist orientation I have already brought to the surface and addressed, which can only express enthusiasm for and identification with the most sublime/Mandarin-ite cultural products, egalitarianism be damned. If anyone is an outsider in this context, it is Jeremy—his studied flaneur pose tended to disdain the haute, in favor of the quotidian and the arbitrary. With Abs, Mary, and myself, we set the...
bar as high as our boundless idealism and stern concentration–ethic could set it; and, what creates real, durable exclusivity in the arts over long periods of time is just this kind of steel–willed ambition, not to sell, not to hit demographics, not to create a new self–image, not to deal drugs covertly, but to create on the highest possible level, against those whose cultural small–mindedness knows no bounds. If I sound sanctimonious, it is for the simple reason that the highest, most durable art and artistic expression was literally sacred and sanctified for/to us. And the only business an artist has being exclusive is if what they've created lives up to a standard of centuries: not of months, years, or decades. Again, I fall, I bleed, I pontificate, but the fact remains: the last, permanent four–artist line–up must be an exclusive one, because, having created extremely rigorous and serious art out of the same social, sexual, temporal and geographical context, no one can get anywhere near us. I pant, I tremble, I expire.

***affixed to the post is “Learning to Dance” by Abby Heller-Burnham***
To locate a thread of “noir” darkness running through the body of artistic work left by the Philly Free School, from Aughts and Teens Philadelphia, I am struck by an interesting contradiction. It has to do with what we were channeling as we were creating that body of work—Philly’s surface/depth tensions, the secret blood which runs through the streets here and tinges them eerily and menacingly red—and the Aughts antithesis we had going, of Philadelphia glamour, euphoria, and sustained intoxication, all of which coexisted harmoniously (somehow) with the darkness, subterfuge, and hidden offal. In our relations to both strains, the Philadelphia ghoulish and glamorous, we maintained a stance of youthful unselfconsciousness—just channeling, not necessarily understanding. To remain euphoric, while creating art tinged with moody darkness, violent sex, and sudden death—to have one’s life embody such a stark and potentially enervating contradiction—all this is only visible many years after the fact, with all the sobriety near-forty can grant. The charm on/of Aughts Philly, it turns out, was both profound and lingering—animating the entire enterprise, what was accomplished then and what is being accomplished around us now, with an electric blue glow. Why the sustained mood of freedom, empowerment, and aesthetic expansiveness was visited upon us I do not know—the strange algorithmic logic around culture...
is evasive against being traced precisely—but the contradictions in the Philly streets in 2014 are even more profound than they were five-ten years ago.

Looking out on South Street on a chilly morning in early spring, I am stunned by the enveloping silence now visited upon it by this lingering recession. The situation brings a few other cultural moments to mind. As to a semi-precise parallel—the Swinging London of ’64 replaced by the recession-ravaged London of ’74 works well with ’04 South Street to our ’14 version of the same. Artists of my generation, largely born in the 70s, forget how very dire the 70s were—the terrible cost of 60s profligacy, as the Baby Boomers lost (I’m estimating) half their massive (and imposing, in bulk) ranks, and countercultural vitality degenerated into emptiness and brutality. The pre-punk London of ’74 was derelict—and, unlike ’14 Philadelphia, there was nothing indigenous to Swinging London to be enumerated, reinforced, and consolidated over a long period of time. Thus, our prognosis is healthier and more live-wired than theirs was—the world media had picked London up briefly and dropped it, whereas we’re still working towards the widespread cultural recognition that many of us feel is our due. So, in some ways, the best may be yet to come.

To visualize relevant American cities like Philadelphia, Memphis, and New York in ’74 is also illustrative—Alex Chilton, in ’74 Midtown Memphis, was gearing rock towards what may prove to be its apogee moment; the ’74 Philly mob was ornately connected to L.A., Memphis, London, and what was left of any attendant cultural world in motion; and the post-modern New York of the Chelsea galleries, Studio 54, on-the-street Andy Warhol, and CBGBs was percolating, even if it never upgraded to a proper boil; but Philadelphia in ’14, despite all the entropy and recessional angst, still compares favorably on every conceivable cultural level, simply owing to that ineluctable body of work which travels far beyond post-modernity and popular art into realms of confrontation in which we chew up Swinging London, and its half-despairing 70s counterpart moments, and spit them out again without much undue strain. My subjective conclusion, as of this morning, is this—there’s still a decent amount of euphoria in the Philly streets for me, however empty and 70-ish they may be for others. That, ultimately, is one monstrous advantage of high art over pop culture productions—they plant seeds which are intended to bear meaningful fruit over protracted periods of time, the way what animated Swinging London was not.
Whatever "geist" we caught that allowed us to ride that contradictory edge—euphoric, revelatory life in the creation of dark, shadowy, spectral art—was an exceedingly generous one, and has allowed those interested to extend this uniquely dark euphoria past the constraints of time and space which bound its creators. Hopefully, America at large can learn this salient lesson (among many) from Philadelphia—that pop culture is decent for what it is, but that it’s the high stuff which really grants magnetism and stealth to cities over decades and centuries.

***affixed to this piece is Mary’s ‘06/’07 portrait of me, with my face “ composited” with Abby’s***

***on the cover of the pdf is a shot of Louis Kahn Park on Pine Street in Center City Philadelphia***

Rising in Scorpio:
Adam Fieled/ Abby Heller-Burnham
Preface

The motivation of this pdf is to collate and consolidate what I deem to be the cream of the Philly Free School’s artistic achievement. I have taken into consideration what I have not taken into consideration—that this judgment is mine alone. If other artists would like to argue for other placements/arrangements, they are welcome to. Nevertheless, for me: what do Abby’s “Nine Paintings” and my “Apparition Poems” have in common? I have been stunned by the parallels (and parallelism) between the two—I’ve already addressed many of the key motifs. They include: a certain approach to depth and complexity involving multiple and multiplying themes and potential meanings; a sense of “queerness” or oddity which is intermittently sexualized (for
Abby, the application is more literal); an urban, rather than suburban or pastoral orientation, which is often site-specific to early twenty-first century Philadelphia (which, by not being New York, builds another level of queerness into the construct); a lack of indigenous American aesthetic influence, and a mistrust of twentieth century art in general (bloodlines running from Abby to nineteenth-century France, Ingres and David; from me to nineteenth-century England, Keats and Wordsworth), while the work does thematically engage contemporary America; and a generalized ambience of darkness, moodiness, the eerie and the haunted.

The difference between Philadelphia-via-England and Philadelphia-via-France (and the twentieth century largely being passed over) is rather pronounced; my approach has in it many levels of directness and earnestness which could comfortably be called English levels, and an adjunct to English Romanticism; Abby’s lateral sense of perversity and absurdism, her inability (thematical) to be morally or ethically earnest, is quintessentially French, while the French sense of darkness has a perception of absurdity built into it, and English gloom can be just plain gloomy. To bring the male/female dichotomy to bear on “Nine Paintings” and “Apparition Poems” is even trickier, and more lateral; Abby’s approach has some feral energy and some tenderness to it; it is as androgynous as the highest art tends to be. About “Apparition Poems,” it would probably be inappropriate for me to comment on. I will remark that I call these two collections together “Rising in Scorpio” specifically because, in this context and in 2013 America, it seems to me that the darkness, depth, and complexity of the two collections will be experienced in many contexts as more feral than not, with many “stings” built into it, for lazy post-modernists and semi-comatose centrists. Good art has always been capable of stinging mediocrity to death, if properly placed and contextualized at the correct moment; for the Philly Free School, the time is now.

It is also my idea (and, honestly, it could be called a pretense) that, if the Philly Free School plants the right seeds, the twenty-first century might be more germane for serious art than the twentieth was; even as our politics, sexual and otherwise, import the best of what the twentieth century had to offer. The higher connotations of the Scorpio archetype have to do with depth, complexity, and the darkness of unsparing truthfulness—the imperative towards unsparing truthfulness (against “eerie” effects which are easily generated and can be superficial), primitive though it is, was important for Abby and I. Even more than myself, Abby suffered in her life from a desire for absolute purity on all levels. “Nine Paintings” and “Apparition Poems” show Abby and I at a point of maximum and precarious balance—able to be truthful and artful on profound levels at once. To do so was, for both of us, in the America we inherited, an act of almost foolhardy bravery; but we did it anyway.

Adam Fieled, 2013

Nine Paintings by Abby Heller-Burnham
Preface

In the continuum of visual art, an oeuvre of nine paintings is not particularly significant unless the nine paintings happen to be masterpieces. With Philadelphia painter Abby Heller-Burnham, this appears to be the case. The limited oeuvre here on display encompasses a dazzling array of formal and thematic material—precise attention to painterly nuance and detail balanced with an idiosyncratic (intermittently “queer”) vision of
urban life in early twenty-first century America. A painting like “The Skaters” embodies this vision—the moody chiaroscuro of the scene, its ambience of desolation, which is a specifically urban (in this case, Philadelphian) ambience; balanced with meticulous formal execution which is nonetheless skewered against conventional painterly representation; create a complex construct which is too formal to be aligned with post-modernism, but also both too dark and too strange to be aligned with middle-of-the-road pictorial art.

To be short; “The Skaters,” and Heller-Burnham’s other masterpieces, are something new under the sun. All are illuminated by the painter’s keen and quirky sense of multiple meanings, of representations whose import multiplies when observed closely and carefully. “The Walls Have Ears” presents a maze of possible meanings and levels of interpretation—the most obvious level concerns sexualized love between women; but the picture finds many ways of being queer, as the games it plays with identities and perspectives are blisteringly intense and complex. It’s a complexity which doesn’t disavow absurdist humor and irony. Compared with what is typically seen in New York galleries, it’s a narrative feast. Many of these paintings are narrative feasts—“The Lost Twins” could be taken as an art-related allegory, or a critique of allegories; a humorous indictment of the process of artistic canonization, or a humorous portrayal of the artist’s vulnerability in the face of time and canonization; a self-portrait, or a parody of self-portraits; or all of these things at once.

This is what Heller-Burnham’s paintings have which has frequently been missing from New York art; a sense of absolute formal and thematic richness, and of boundlessness in richness, resultant from the exercise of intense (newly, American) imagination. “On the Other Hand” is a narrative feast in another direction—the social mores of American “indie” culture meeting the transcendental religiosity of Renaissance painting. The juxtaposition is bizarre, and uncanny—it collapses many centuries together in a novel way, to lampoon hipster culture; but this lampoon is executed with the absolute technical authority and mastery of the Renaissance masters themselves, and so winds up transcending its status as a lampoon. Not since Picasso has a visual artist fulfilled this many imperatives at once—that the painter is female, and queer, is a triumph both for American art and American feminism. Yet, Heller-Burnham’s scope as an artist is too broad to be tied wholesale either to formalism, the American (in its novel Philadelphian form) or queer politics—as with all superior artists, there is a universality to her creations broad enough to align her with the most durable humanism. If the oeuvre of her masterworks is small, it is a smallness which the paintings themselves belie—each painting represents an incision into the aesthetic
consciousness of the West in 2013. Like Picasso, Heller-Burnham has her way of enacting phallocentrism— and her uncompromising originality is as brutish in its sharpness. Heller-Burnham not only enacts, but is, an American artistic revolution.

Adam Fieled, 2013

“The Lost Twins”
“The Walls Have Ears”
“On the Other Hand”
“Learning to Dance”
“Frozen Warnings”
“The Skaters”
“Ghost of Day”
“The First Real Top”
“Meeting Halfway”
Apparition Poems
Adam Fieled

Apologia

Though no sustained narrative buoys it up, “Apparition Poems” is meant to be sprawling, and epic. An American epic, even one legitimate on world levels, could only be one made up of disparate, seemingly irreconcilable parts—such a state of affairs being America’s, too. The strains which chafe and collide in “Apparition Poems” are discrete—love poems, carnal poems, meta-poems, philosophical poems, etc. Forced to cohabitate, they
make a clang and a roar together (or, as Whitman would have it, a “barbaric yawp”) which
creates a permanent (for the duration of the epic) sense of dislocation, disorientation, and
discomfort. This is enhanced by the nuances of individual poems, which are often shaped in
the dialect of multiple meanings and insinuation. Almost every linguistic sign in “Apparition
Poems” is bifurcated; either by the context of its relationship to other linguistic signs in the
poems, or by its relationship to the epic whole of the book itself. If “Apparition Poems” is
an epic, it is an epic of language; the combative adventure of multiple meanings, shifting
contexts and perspectives, and the ultimate despair of the incommensurability of artful
utterance with practical life in an era of material and spiritual decline. It is significant that the
poems are numbered rather than named; it emphasizes the fragmentary (or apparitional)
nature of each, its place in a kind of mosaic, rather than a series of wholes welded together
by chance or arbitrary willfulness (as is de rigueur for poetry texts).

This is the dichotomy of “Apparition Poems”— epics, in the classical sense, are
meant to represent continuous, cohesive action— narrative continuity is essential.
“Apparition Poems” is an epic in fragments— every poem drops us, in medias res, into a
new narrative. If I choose to call “Apparition Poems” an epic, not in the classical (or
Miltonic) sense but in a newfangled, American mode (which nonetheless maintains some
classical conventions), it is because the fragments together create a magnitude of scope
which can comfortably be called epic. The action represented in the poems ranges from the
sublime to the ridiculous, from the heroic to the anti-heroic; there are dramatic monologues
set amidst the other forms, so that the book never strays too far from direct and directly
represented humanism and humanistic endeavor. The American character is peevish if not
able to compete— so are the characters here. Life degenerates into a contest and a quest for
victory, even in peaceful or solitary contexts. Yet, if the indigenous landscape is strange and
surrealistic, it is difficult to maintain straightforward competitive attitudes— consciousness
has to adjust while competing, creating a quandary away from the brazen singularity which
has defined successful, militaristic America in the world.

Suddenly, American consciousness is beleaguered by shifting sands and multiple
meanings— an inability, not only to be singular but to perceive singular meanings. Even as
multiplications are resisted, everything multiplies, and often into profit loss, rather than
profit gain. The epic, fragmentary narrative of “Apparition Poems” is a down-bound, tragic
one, rather than a story of valor or heroism. The consolation for loss of material consonance
is a more realistic vision of the world and of human life— as a site of/for dynamism, rather
than stasis, of/for multiplicity, rather than singularity. “Apparition Poems” is a vista into
“multiple America” from Philadelphia, its birth-place, and a city beleaguered also by multiple
visions of itself. No city in America has so much historical heft; nor did any American city
suffer so harsh a demotion in the brutally materialistic twentieth century. Yet, as “Apparition
Poems” suggests, if a new America is to manifest in the twenty-first century, it might as well
begin in Philadelphia. If the epic focuses on loss followed by more loss, rather than eventual,
fulsome triumph, then so be it. And if “Apparition Poems” as fragmentary epic imposes a
lesson, it is this— the pursuit of singularity in human life is a fool’s game; the truth is almost
always, and triumphantly, multiple. If multiple meanings are difficult to assimilate, there can
still be no recourse to anything else, for the scrupulous-minded and cognizant.

Adam Fieled, 2013
Credits

As/Is—534

blue & yellow dog—1249, 1261, 1339

Cricket Online Review—1558, 1571
Black-shirted, bright eyes in dream-blues, parents dead of a car crash, I kissed her so long I felt as if I would crash,
South Street
loud around
us, lips soft—

A patch of white light
appeared on my wall
late last night. It was
no shadow.
I thought
it might be a cross, I
thought it might be a
sign, but by the time
I turned my head, it
was gone.
I thought

I want to last—
to be the last
of the last of
the last to be
taken by time,
but the thing
about time is
that it wants,
what it wants
is us, all of us
wane quickly
for all time’s
ways, sans “I,”
what I wants—

There comes a time
history’s viability in
impressing us goes
out our mind’s eye,
we are ghosts then,
we join the “rest of,”
until someone’s lips
hips us to secrets, in
case we forgot, that
nothing ever happped,
nothing ever got writ.

I said, “I can’t
even remember
the last time I
was excited, how
can I associate
ideas?”

She pulled
out a gun, a tube
of oil, and an air
cushion,
and it was
a spontaneous
overflow,
powerfully
felt, in which we
reaped together—

If I had Neko Case
for one night, I’d
dip her red hair in
red wine, suck it
dry, bathe
her in
honey,
dive
into what's
pink and blue,
roll out the red carpet.

If I had Neko Case
for one night, I'd
part the Red Sea
to make her
come, come
pangs,
needles,
she's
stiff from
ecstasy, I'm
freckle-fucked.

If I had Neko Case
I would never
leave my bed
again; I'd lay,
awake to
music,
voices,
ether,
ever doubt
Heaven exists
on Earth, between

throats, notes, legs.

Is art slightly less
stupid than every-
thing else?
    I am more
moved by
flesh, and
stupidly,
how easily
some skin
peels off
    layers of text—
“company of blood,”
Lucy on a bed
    with diamonds—

#1084

Poems are train-wrecks
    that move— to stand
on tracks, to do so solidly, is
    suicide of a high order—

to die by force of wreckage—

#1085

Metaphysics of Facebook—
how many pictures can one
woman upload?
    She sits on a
shag carpet, or, in a leotard,
dances, or drinks a beer, arm
around a disheveled mate—
    all possible selves
captured for Net
priceless and free
discrete but not—

#1089

I love you,
I love you,
I love you—

clouds are
moving in
behind us,
storms are
forming in
front, blue

sky purple,
green grass
yellow, all

gthings pale
to this dark—

#1103

As a child, I
reached up,
towards my
Mother; as

a man, as I
reach, I am
deep down
in earth, or

I reach out
to find air,
nothing to
mother me,

emptiness,
soot & ash.

#1117

Sometimes you write
from ocean’s bottom,
blue waters bury you,

an octopus comes to
give you ink, tentacle
words, fortitude for
battles to get back on
the surface, where you
must fight to get past
jellyfish blocks, tears—

#1121

How I wanted her!
Everything pointed
me into her—
gossamer silk
over her belly
black panties
head turned
towards me—
I nailed her to my wall,
I nailed her—
she never forgave me

#1134

It is by dint of great labor
that lines heap up on one
another (enjambed or not),

it is by dint of great labor
that they take on the cast,
die, substance that sticks,
it is by dint of great labor
that poets must forget this,
because to stick means not
to stick, it means to loosen
perpetually out of grooves,
let things topple into place,

let shapes manifest slowly,
let life meander, be rolling—

#1145

The Tower of Verse
is a Babel, no one pays
their rent, many leap
from windows to sure
death, many leave, yet
there is a strange sense
of satisfaction given to
those who stay, and it
is merely this—
clean windows
allow us to see
wisps of smoke,
(grey, red, turbid)
rise from ashes—

#1148

September sunlight,
elegiac as collapsed
ruins, festival ashes,
nooks where hidden
lovers laid, tasting
wine on one another’s
breath, piercing silk

layers, springing up,
ruddy, fulsome, like

little flesh harvests—

September leaves hang on—

loads about to be blown
into black concrete wombs

defretted by windy displacements

The essential philosophical question
is incredibly stupid—
why is it that things happen? You can
ask a thousand times,
it won’t matter— nothing does, except
these things that
keep happening, “around” philosophy.

I went with her on
a daytrip inside her
head; there were kids’
toys, storybooks, red
monsters, fire trucks,
silver streaks, stairs,
rooms everywhere, it
was a funhouse, but
in each mirror she
looked different, and
I couldn’t see myself—

#1209

Poems with “I” and “she”
are older than the galaxy,
have power to rivet me,
because there is no “I”
for me without a “she,”
even if I feminize this
highly vaginal computer
screen, my seminal hands—

#1223

She was seated at a desk,
giving a dramatic speech
(pronounced with acidic
bitterness), glaring at me,
I was punching a telephone,
trying to reach Dominique
who had given me a phony
number, while two young, androgynous sprites made love in a chair, Leonard joined my committee—

she was seated at a desk, her voice rose to a pitch I couldn’t tolerate, but also it brought me to the verge of orgasm, because she was sucking myself out of me, doing it psychically, when I woke up, she was updating her Face about lost sleep—

#1241

Why does no one tell the truth? Because the truth is (more often than not) absurd. No one wants to look absurd, so no one tells the truth, which creates even more absurdity; worlds grow into self-parody, systems grow down into gutters, whole epochs are wasted in perfidy; Cassandra finally opens her mouth, no one listens, they want her to star in a porno, set her up with a stage-name, she learns not to rant, visions cloud her eyes, cunt—

#1249

Despite what I write, there’s not much sex in the world—walk down Walnut Street, take an inventory—how much sex are these people getting? This one fat, this one ugly, this one old, this
one a baby, a couple married twenty years, or ten, or five—not much sex in these lives. But media, movies thrive on representing this tiny demographic: single, young, promiscuous. Crowds come.

If I were a rock star, I’d take a flight to Singapore, hoist you up to “Imperial Suite” in a swank hotel, turn on a Jacuzzi, order up some caviar (which I don’t even like, but no matter), we’d take our clothes off, conceive a child right there, which we’d raise from Imperial Suite, and my World Tour would begin right there, would go on forever—

You can take for granted lots of God-awful garbage in places deemed important by fools; this goes for every thing, including poetry. Why? Because the world runs (has, will always) on mediocrity, so
safe, so comforting, like a mug of hot cocoa on a winter’s night, or a mediocre simile, people want others to be mediocre, to be fools, that’s just the way things go, people are nothing to write home about, or (if you are writing to God) nothing to write about at all, the world is no mystery, all the mystery is in the night sky, looking up.

#1288

Times you get bored with the process, but worse are times when words are little deaths, wrung out like sheets, draped over hangers, out in a damp yard on a cold autumn day, as wind rises to pin them to your hopeless breast.

#1303

Philly: I duck punches, land them from a pink-flesh moon. Fists don’t know me, hung like an Exit sign. This city hell I write against, windows shuttered up, visionary
deadness, decayed tufts,
I’ll ride it out in needles
poised on waves, poison
apples bitten into like so
many razors in disguise,
silver. Tumble into light
shafts, ratty entrances out.

She hovers above planet
Earth, making strategies
for safe landings, but not
able to see that she is also
on planet Earth, watched
like a crazed cat, a maze-
rat, or a tied-up mime, I
cannot save someone so
high up or far down, it’s
like a black thread about
to snap, as it strains past
breaking point she reaches
for champagne, to celebrate—
bubbles lunge up to break.

we can’t stop trying to conceive,
even though our bodies are dead
to each other, and nightly deaths
I took for granted are razors in a
part of my flesh that
can never live again—
certain possessions possess us.
Hunters get smitten with their prey, but to kill is such an amazing rush who could possibly resist, I’m into these thoughts because you dazzle me away from words into your red pulpy depths, which I resent, but I can do nothing about, because you have nails in your cunt and crucifix in your mouth, when I come I’m a perfect personal Jesus, but the gash is all yours, did I mention I love you?

Before the sun rises, streets in Philly have this sheen, different than at midnight, as the nascent day holds back its presence, but makes itself felt in air like breathable crystal—
   no one can tell me
   I’m not living my life to the full.

She said, you want Sister Lovers, you son of a bitch, pouted on a beige couch in Plastic City, I said, I want Sister Lovers, but I’m not a son of a bitch, and I can prove it (I drooled slightly),
took it out and we made 
such spectacular love that 
the couch turned blue from 
our intensity, but I had to 
wear a mask because I'd 
been warned that this girl 
was, herself, a son of a bitch—

#1328

The girl on the trolley 
had pitch black hair, 
eyes to match, I got 
her vibes instantly—
    so, what do we 
want to do? Do 
we want to do 
this? Is it OK?
took her back here 
took her clothes off 
took her not gently 
    I'll never take the 34 again—

#1330

When the sky brightens slightly 
into navy blue, “what’s the use” 
says the empty street to parking 
lots elevated four stories above.

#1335

terse as this is, it is 
given to us in bits 
carelessly shorn 
from rocky slopes, 
of this I can only 
say nothing comes 
with things built in,
it’s always sharp edges,  
crevices, crags, precipice,  
abrupt plunges into “wants,”  
what subsists between us  
happens in canyons lined  
in blue waters where this  
slides down to a dense  
bottom, I can’t retrieve  
you twice in the same  
way, it must be terse  
because real is terse,  
tense because it’s so  
frail, pine cones held  
in a child’s hand, snapped.

#1339

house with ivy  
wooden door,  
yellow kitchen,  
clunky dresser  
on which she displayed all  
kinds of tricks, nights were  
young, strong, climactic in  
this place, sex,  
green buds, all  
this here, I’m a  
kid, as a man, I  
look at this, can’t sense  
much who I was, why I  
ended this, if it is an end—

17

#1340

Arms folded over chest  
(as the man on the four of  
Swords), she paints inside  
a box-like carven space,  
(dank edges only seen on  
the outside), light filters in  
from small square windows,
I hover over her, I’m this
that she wants, but what
she needs is to once again
feel what avalanches can’t
reach this head so full of
color, ribbons, blueness.

Secrets whispered behind us
have a cheapness to bind us
to liquors, but may blind us
to possibilities of what deep
secrets are lost in pursuit of
an ultimate drunkenness that
reflects off surfaces like dead
fishes at the bottom of filthy
rivers—what goes up most is
just the imperviousness gained
by walking down streets, tipsy,
which I did as I said this to her,
over the Schuylkill, two fishes.

What’s in what eyes?
What I see in hers is
mixed greenish silence,
somewhat garish, it’s
past girlish (not much),
but I can’t touch her
flesh (set to self-destruct),
anymore than she can understand the book
her cunt is, that no one reads directly, or speaks of, there’s no love other than “could be,” but I think of her throat cut—that’s her slice of smut.

This process of leaping happens between lines, like a fish that baits its own hooks; heights in depth, depths of height, all colliding in a mesh of net cast only for a fish to bring it down on itself, so that others swim out past—I don’t mean myself in this.

Two hedgerows with a little path between—to walk in the path like some do, as if no other viable route exists, to make Gods of hedgerows
that make your life tiny, is a sin of
some significance in a world where
hedgerows can be approached from
any side—I said this to a man who
bore seeds to an open space, and he
nodded to someone else and whistled
an old waltz to himself in annoyance.

I leaned out into the breeze (no
cars impinging on any side), did
not spit but let myself be blown
back, knowing that vistas opened
when I did so, appreciating what
was infinite in this small moment,
an old song on the radio, a breeze,
a moving car (me at the wheel), all
simple, succinct, clear, crisp, cutting,
what blood came out was nourished
by the open air, came back in again.

Passages that shudder between
blackness between legs between
what moves (taps head) between
us like this (taps head again) hints
she may not be the animal bride I’m
looking for (by this I mean seed carrier,
not the same as mother-for-kids, almost),
what’s between what used to be between

us, what now is, is between her, others who
have more claim to be animal brides, but she’s
here, that’s the key, here now, actually, which may
be all that matters, if to matter is to lie back, legs
apart, between being, becoming, moving, removing
all barriers, fences, boundaries, expenses to move again.

#1476

Days follow days off cliffs—
do these things we do have
any resonance, do they rise
into the ether, or are they to
be ground down into pulp,
briefly making earth sodden,
then dissipated dust scattered
over plains too vast, blasted
with winds, rains, storms, to
be counted or harvested?

#1480

How horrendous, to realize there
are people in the world with no
soul, walking zeros, hollow spaces,
dead end interiors, permanently
frozen faculties, how horrendous
to watch how they borrow words
of others to sound profound, but
each echo reveals there’s nothing
behind it but the kind of charred
silence that comes after a corpse
is burnt— how horrendous, how
it makes some of us cling to what
we feel, how we feel, that we feel,
and that everything we feel is so
precious, specifically (and only)
because it is felt, and stays felt.

#1488

liquor store, linoleum
floor, wine she chose
  was always deep red,
dark, bitter aftertaste,
unlike her bare torso,
  which has in it
  all that ever was
  of drunkenness—
to miss someone terribly,
to both still be in love, as
she severs things because
  she thinks she must—
exquisite torture, it’s
  a different bare torso,
(my own) that’s incarnadine—

#1491

To wake up in frost,
ineffectual sun up in
blue sky bruised gray,
is to huddle into these
words, burrow down in
them until you hit a spot
of warmth, like memories
stuck like bark to roots, 
of this or that, of she or her, if this trope is over-worn so be it, I’ve had enough of pretending this crux isn’t one, so I’ll lean into it, again—

nothingness grows vast, 
nothingness tastes sweet only for ten seconds— of this, depth without depth, crass substitute for realms of total glory she effaces

(once spilled milk cries) like a chalk-stain on blue jeans, a just-smoked joint.

New Years Day—
sky is same as its been, perched in perfect beauty in search of a better place (power lines
cut it off), it hurts
to know all other
places exist than
this, visionary as
this deadness is.

The importance of elsewhere,
Larkin wrote, but didn’t name
money as the reason for none
(no elsewhere), iron brutalities
forge fences around my words—
these buildings are neuroses, I
can’t see them without a desire
to take pills, drinks, anything to
free me from ugly hegemonies—

Myths are made of us, we
who spin myths from this
happenstance life, which is
hewn of rocks, books, lies,
truths, loves, hangings of
all these things, in myths
we are heroes, braggarts,
martyrs, rogues, angels, murderers and assholes, but myths go on sans us, who only wanted slightly more than Gods gave us, & so made ourselves Gods, bugger any odds against us.

Sky of mud, what we have placed in you is much more rank than any rapist ever put in prone woman—like a race of rapists, we have prowled earth in search of womb-like comforts, sent vapors into ether just to get someplace sans loss of time, expense; for us, no defense, death—as rapists, caged, gored.

steps up to my flat, on which we sat, tongues flailed like fins, on sea of you, not me, but we thought (or I thought) there’d be reprieve in between yours, for us
to combine, you were terribly vicious, this is our end (here, amidst I and I), does she even remember this, obscure island, lost in Atlantis?

#1512

Do you know I tried to reach, I did, but you’re a far away planet, I can’t, its rings all around, I can’t see surface, I want to, can you change orbits for me once?

#1514

You can’t get it when you want it, but when I want it I get it; she rolled over on her
belly, which was very full, and slept; its just shadows on the wall, I thought, dark.

I climb over you, onto me, but me is not the “I” I want it to be, climb down, rafters heave, wood slats, fences,

all this is you, already over & beyond, is this fairness?

She says she wants babies from me, she sends this to me, nudging
my body in a
straight line I
recognize for
its blue streak,
I'll give her a
baby, I say, it's
part of a plan,
indecipherable—

This posse wants “success,” in
all the wrong ways— down by
the old corral, I had a shoot-out
with the leader, who gave his girl
black eyes, battered thoughts, but
she’s devoted, because she counts
“success” on the wrong fingers, I
hated to see her get trampled by a
buffalo herd— anyway, ten paces,
I nailed him right in the heart, but
wasn’t bothered, that part of him
never worked to begin with. Eat
dust, I said in parting, write about
how it tastes, you might “make it”
after all, but keep it in your mouth.

Poems: do this every day, it
becomes like roulette without
being (or seeming) Russian; if
you go here what happens, if
you move your knight onto a new square can you take all the pawns (at once, even, why not be ambitious?), not everyone is simpatico, the knights often say they’re kings, the board is clay.

I'm having a better time now, I told her, it's unfortunate that you were happier fifteen years ago, but you certainly had your chance, those days we sat next each other different places, and of course your best friend the idiot, Queen of Sheba, now here you are back hot to fool around, suddenly I call the shots, I'm a real hot-shot, there’s a shot we might actually shoot each other, because violence is what you want—she unzipped her dress, frowning.

So much gets involved with this that isn’t this, that what this is gets lost, whatever it is, which no one knows, but that “I” is in it somewhere (no one knows where), there must be a “you” (if it’s art,
as it may or may not be), so
two bases are covered, like
two breasts of a mother
weaning her young, and
whether or not we are made
young by this is another good
question: we may be, maybe.

Facebook girls commit
acts of virtual adultery
every day, wanton acts
of exhibitionism, sucks
of minor stars in tiny
firmaments, I’ve got
them (Facebook girls),
in virtual corners in
virtual states of undress
virtually shagging my
arse off— stick it in,
like a screwdriver into
a keyboard, in & out,
in virtual light & heat.

“This art game is funny, it’s
all about staring at walls at
night, connecting blue dots
of consciousness, fitting in
pieces to your own puzzle
that may or may not be at
all comprehensible,”
I didn’t wait for him to listen
    I was watching the walls

What could be more crass
than a round-trip ticket to
Los Angeles? Nothing but
beds of starlets, flawless in
perfect color harmony but
vomit stains in the toilet, I
don’t know what could be
more crass, in fact I don’t
know anything anymore, I
think the sky is marvelous.

What a tussle it was, I
could only see her eyes,
tiny bits of red above,
stark, blank blueness, I
felt animal fear between
us, but a poltergeist was
pushing our bodies into
one another, dead flesh
inhabited by spirits, for
the time nothing came
from our mouths, dead
liveliness, deep into the
wolf’s hour this went on—
our eyes couldn’t close.

Think of these in terms
of vertical movements—
what goes up or doesn’t.

Does this go up? It may,
if it creates something I
feel is not “in the world”
yet, but it must also have solid roots in the world to be something else, it must acknowledge what can be called horizontal. The best poems are zig-zags, lightning bolts, that go from side to side, up at the same time. This is a meta-bolt, but whether it “goes” is up to you alone.

I’m in your house: your husband, kids not home. A voice (yours) follows me around, playing on my body, until I’m in your bathroom,
smoking butts on
a sunny spring day.
Your body doesn’t
appear. It seems to
me you’re suspect,
Steph, it seems to
me you want too
too much. Then, you
always said I was

a dreamer. What
do we have past
dreams anyway?
What else is love?

#1552

Your name grows, as it grows
your fame grows, as it grows it
becomes clear you’re not who
you are, you exist in people’s
heads as something Other, I
heard this from someone at a
time when I did not exist, now
that I exist I exist as something
Other, but I can see into some
people’s heads, and the “I” that
I am is amused by the “you”: an
otter (might as well be), ox, fox,
dragon, dog, pig, jackal, hyena,
anything but an actual human.

#1553

I see her head, not yours,
on my pillow, dear, but I
don’t really see either one
of you except as you were
when you had no interest
in my pillows: isn’t it sad?
Since you are a scorpion that stings herself to death, after so many stings, redness never leaves my joints, I feel zilch. I call this your passionate time, as I have no intent of tempting the scorpion again. I've seen nests for you all over Philly, from Front Street right up to Baltimore, and you know what? You might finally get the death you want. A sultry night, desert all around, legs akimbo.

This is meant to be level on level, layer on layer, like insides of mountains, but I only have so many, & when something takes over, I drop a little lower, my guts drop too, and days I could reach out for you have gone. Well, I call that level hell.

“In Your Eyes,” the song goes, “the resolution of all my fruitless searches,” only what I see in your eyes is fruitless, and what Shelley might have called “luminous green orbs” look like turbid wastelands,
capable of ruining any day I might have you nipping at my heels. This is what I think about her, but don’t dare say, she’s too young to know anything about wastelands, I’m an old scorpion with mud of my own.

If poetry makes nothing happen, there is no “great political poetry tradition,” so I yawp no “O anything” to anyone who is not my captain, and whose position is not in any way tenable; no one (that I know) has any excuses, we forge ahead regardless, Nero’s fiddle is sounding in the distance, personal habits of Romans have entered our lives, but I have this time to write this and if you like it, is it enough?

Since no one wants to eat shit, we give our shit to the Earth, it’s still shit, to eat it
means
that's what
we think
of Earth
(less than
us), Earth
is more
God to
us than
anything—
who wants
to hear
the truth
of this?

To cut right to the bone—
there is no bone in this,
it's mirrors, echoes, bits,
more than play, less than
life, but anything limiting
this needs to be chucked
like fruit rinds into a bin,
any arbitrary signifier that
knows itself to be arbitrary
can \textit{work} as mirrors, echoes,
bits, if you have faith that
what's ineffable counts, is.

This guy thinks he knows
what's really real, writes a
book, I do the same thing:
but whoever says this is in
a chain of unreality which
reality will quickly undo: I
know whoever says this is
lost in a maze of illusions,
which must be stymied: it's
something you only say if
you're deluded; but then it
means you know you're in
a maze of delusions, which
is what's really real: a bitch.

#1574

There you are: towel-headed,
toweled, milling through large
crowds, slightly self-conscious
but convinced of your uppity
superiority— this you is me, I
push through crowds (antique
book stores, solicitous clerks, I
can't tell if they mean me when
they speak), stumble up stairs,
nobody notices the freakishness
of my appearance, as I am you—
having lived your life, I'm past
your death— cogs cut, dusted.

38

#1576

Who told poets to be poets?
Nobody tells anyone things
like this anymore— Poetess,
she comes to me with “this,”
it’s all wine and roses for two
nights, but I’m left dizzy— is
this the end of poetry? There’s
a war between poetry & sex, it’s always sex’s dominance we fight, she tells me this, but we still make love. And it’s good & hard. I’m pure in this, I tell myself. I know what I’m doing. I do, too, in ways limited by perspectives, of which this is half of one. Is it enough?

The poets around me say one thing repeatedly: “not enough,” and with force I used to not be able to take, but what their enough is is all pride, prejudice, lies, all sorts of cowardice, dying limbs, fried brains, the lot of Satan’s syndromes, and I (being lowly wise), stay as low to the riverbed, listening to sphere-music they can’t hear, but who cares about us?

“Waiting for the heavens to fall, what can I do with this call,” this asinine pop song was written by me in a dream of you where you called me (obviously), took to be already granted what I haven’t given to you yet, but experience,
my love, is the only thing worth giving, and I’ve got that from you in spades, so when heaven falls we’ll catch it, lay it between our sheets, dirty as they must be—

#1582

To send bodies up into ether (what does this no one knows) all flesh become hands that can clasp (ecstasy of joining things),

to be joined to a part that you suspected evil of, but is really only love, is to give thanks for raised curtains which (sadly) are doused in your own blood, & as I join this exultant spirit, doused in white light, I’m steeped in my own darkness, death, excrement.

#1583

I was on Pine Street outside the Drop, I looked, saw this girl (maybe nineteen, twenty) in black (not morbid black, just normal clothes), I turned for a split second, then when I looked she had disappeared—
this (for once) was visionary life, but the Drop was still the Drop, I walked out with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs on my I-Pod, as I grow richer every thing, everyone deteriorates: I wore black the next day.

“The condition of being kidnapped by angels: that’s what good art must impose on a willing audience.” Who was this guy talking to? Are we meant to believe this Romantic bullshit? Ah, who cares, it’ll pass. He was walking his dog, thinking. It was a sunny day in suburbia. The concrete really was (and I mean this) concrete. But this is the thing: I do believe what this guy says, his Romantic bullshit. I see things, you know what I mean?

I was talking to a dude I knew from school, I said, “I see the levels from sleeping with psychopaths, that’s how I get them,” levels were (I meant) places
between souls where
spaces open for metaphor,
“but when I carry them
over to my bed, every
psychopath levels me.”

#1601

What words get sent up
on sharp frequencies are
fractious, bent from pain,
Hephaestus in iron-groans,
what goes up sticks around,
so that base/top get covered,

all things resonate like pitchforks, tweaked by conductors
before their final, triumphant
performance for a hall empty
of bodies, filled to capacity.

#1602

I stepped like a mantis off this ship
of fools, felt around for prey, found
a plate of ants to put in a microwave,
I saw how they scurried briefly, put it
into text that had the heat of ovens in it, shipped this text across vast oceans, it preyed on suspicions, was placed on plates, now that I have prayed, I am (or may be) redeemed, but every step I take feels like a scurry, as the fools are more numerous than I thought, just like ants.

#1603

“Be careful what you handle,” I told her, “you can get to me even if you touch another,” it happened in an office shaped like the foyer of a huge hovel, built of mud, etchings of bugs on the wall, perfect perverse kids scampering among clods.

“You know what I want, and how I can get it,” she replied, as she took another out, put me in, but only inside a brain used amiss to find a level that, shaped like a foyer, was past office, into brick, sans mud.

#1604

Here’s where shifts (red shifts) happen in perspective, I thought, slopping dark meat onto my plate, here’s where angles converge to put me past the nest. General laughter over pictures, womb-like spaces, but I was in hers as
I was in with them. It hurts, but he’s dead, I never met him. It’s a shame, I never met him. Blood moves through air between her, me, them—leaves on concrete.

This killer wears a tight black shirt, glasses. There are noises of digging happening from the bathroom, she’s in bed, hands over her mouth, frozen upset. Then, the mirror is dug through, his face appears in a wall with a square cut in it. The face is there, hovers there, just sits, it has the promise of action that kills. This is the tableau I watch every time I’m in the bathroom while she’s in bed. And smile.

Every live body has a dialect: to the extent that bodies are in the process of effacing both themselves, what they efface, I move past dialect to the extent that there are no no-brainers here, what’s moral in this is the
belief that properly used dialects emanate waves to hold bodies in place. As to who’s saying this, I heard this on the street last night after a few drinks with an ex at Dirty Frank’s. It was a bum who meant it, it worked.

Follow Abraham up the hill: to the extent that the hill is constituted already by kinds of knives, to what extent can a man go up a hill, shepherd a son to be sacrificed, to be worthy before an almighty power that may or may not have had conscious intentions where hills, knives, sons were concerned, but how, as I watch this, can I not feel that Abraham, by braving knives, does not need the one he holds in his rapt hands?

Philosophy says that poets want to lose. What are conditions of losing: to whom? The conditions (to whom they concern, to unrepresented phantoms, mostly) are colors, which, to transcribe, require a solid core of nebulous necromancy which philosophy calls
(for its own poetic reasons) “loss.” I took this from one strictly (which necessitated looseness towards me) for himself, took several median blended colors and painted a razor on the roof of a red building. Then I fell off. But I lived.

I'm looking at the sky, writing like a man writes when the sister lives in an apartment with a husband three blocks away, casts her body over here to do what cannot be done ad infinitum; and that the evil I saw in this family was hers, the scourge who ruined my life. That night I had her in summer's sweat, what it should've been, what it was, the sting of it lingers, all in the sister, & for once I don’t dare bifurcate myself, they do it for me, naturally.

Poor Schopenhauer’s axioms: all in the will is a fight to beat other wills. I see him in his meager room, his will bent not to do much, save himself the trouble of fighting these ineluctable battles, but not
able to refrain from eating, breathing, shitting, fucking, all those simple acts that are will-to-survival, but Arthur casts himself into a future of power, not knowing when it arrived it was to be a crass joke, ended with face in turtle soup.

The “I” that writes cannot be (he told us, perched on a hill of flowers which he crushed, but, of course, incompletely, and not all of them at once) strictly for-itself as it has no substance: a student walked up, pricked his forearm (the back side of it) with a small razor, he cringed but only briefly, leaning forward so that a row of buttercups doused him yellow. The “I” that writes has a relationship that is very much for itself, but it has a strictly independent existence, so that what constitutes a human “I” has no meaning for it. Now, you need to know this: I was not the student with the razor, but I supplied the razor to the student that cut the professor’s forearm, but you will never know how I got it, or why.

I ask you this here, while I look down on you, as you look up at me, and the different ups & downs of us play themselves out, so that if, while being in this state, we are in and out of each other, all streaks
of blues, grays, blacks can be edited out, and voice-
overs take the place of our raw voices. Voices that
I trust, cherish, but these voices are too crude that
around us cast nets, so that we become crabs in and
out of ourselves, so that I remark to you (you’re on
top now) that things that need to be asked can only
be answered with skin, redness, pinkness, dots, this.

#1626

If it builds, she thinks, I’ll
do this, I’ll get out. Is it that
she’s so stuck she can’t move?
The baby needs looking after,
but, she thinks, so does her
soul, and to the extent that it’s
not being fed, she needs a new
bed somewhere. But the money
isn’t hers, it just isn’t, and she
walks the dog thinking these
thoughts in loops. And this is
where I intercepted her, in this
alley, with the dog, with fallen
traces of one who falls. That I
didn’t acknowledge her speaks
to the places I’ve fallen as well.

48

#1627

He says that these have an “aura.”
To the extent that words on a page
can, they do. He said these things,
but then they were up on a site that
has its own aura, the poems become
composites. Whatever, I thought this,
not out loud, these auras only work
in three dimensions, and I'm already
in three dimensions, I'm already art
to begin with. Besides, who cares? I
quickly made a left onto Broad, the
radio was turned off and I opened
the window, it was a cold, breezes
danced around my face, in words.

Mrs. Trellings was in bed with her husband of
fifty summers. Now, it was winter, & the smell
of his farts, the sound of his snores, all these
things took her on a soul's journey to Pluto, in
a deep freeze of no sleep she would linger. It's
a story (Mrs. Trellings thought) of reverse things:
reverse providence, reverse encounter, all things
that should culminate ending in anti-climax. But
it should be noted that Mrs. Trellings was quite
intelligent, it was a week before Christmas & she
saw turkeys everywhere. They had five kids. She
thought of them, left it at that. And didn’t sleep.

This party was too much, she
was dancing, she moved away
from me, she wanted this other
guy, they danced, I sat watching
guys go into the bathroom to do
blow, I looked out at the palms,
realized we were all caught in a
net of perfect safety, circular
perfection, getting what you
want when you want it, why is
it that from Pascal to Hollywood,
perfection kills? Then he felt he
was already dead, headed for the
bathroom himself, cold & comforted.

She was eating lunch, I was watching her eat
lunch, I started having all these thoughts about
how people reveal themselves, even just how
they eat their meals but it was such a nice day
and I had a few drinks and I just kind of got
lost in it all, the food was really good but there
was this sense that nothing could really last,
everyone has these great cars and these great lives but nothing really lasts, and I start to worry even just about eating lunch like this, isn’t there something better I should be doing? Isn’t there something more important than this? I don’t want to get all existential about this cause it happens all the time, but I’m telling you this cause I know you have these feelings too, and it doesn’t matter how we communicate as long as the basic gist of things comes through, in fact I’m kind of eating lunch right now and kind of having the same feelings, I get depressed in the afternoons here because everything is so still and perfect, so even though I have to live in this perfected state (some people say it’s exalted, I don’t think it’s exalted, I don’t even know what exalted means) it just doesn’t work. I guess the lesson is that we should all skip lunch, I know it’s completely absurd but it might be better just to eat breakfast and dinner, but you know, people in this town have to do certain things at certain times which is why I treasure this, but hold on a sec I just got a text from somebody, do you mind if I call you back, if not today tomorrow, I really want to hear your thoughts on this?

Look, it’s not like I could’ve raised you any other way. The rules are the rules and you know the way this town is, I don’t want to see you there sitting there sulking like you don’t enjoy these things. My deal is over, I’m an old bitch whose worn out my welcome on every conceivable avenue,
my tits sag, my breath stinks, the guys I have left can’t get it up half the time. You have to use it, kiddo, you have to use what you’ve got, and if I push, it’s just because the reputation you make now is going to follow you around forever, and yeah, you don’t have to use eyeliner just to cross the fucking street, you don’t have to wear fur to buy cigarettes, but I’ve given you all this shit specifically to use, and I don’t necessarily mind (though I’m tempted to barge in and steal some of that cock for myself) hearing your bed-springs creaking at five in the morning cause it means you’re doing good business and that’s the whole point of living here, you do good business or you don’t, and you’ll see what it’s like when you’re doing this, you go straight to hell and have to live through the little cunts like yourself, but you’re my little cunt and I’m not going to see you waste your little cunt while you still have all that juice running between your legs like I used to have, and this needs to become a family tradition because family is all I have left. So just keep going where you need to go, but don’t complain to me about love, there is no love, there’s only skin, blood, cum, spit, phlegm, & lots of it.

People need to understand that you can make a difference these days. Alright, so the system’s trash, we make a new system. Or, if we don’t, we change the system. People don’t realize that there is a “we” but I’ve seen it with my own eyes, this really is still (no matter what anyone says) the greatest country in the world and you have to be
a part of it and you have to try and change things. It's not like I condone all my own methods, but I'm a woman and you have to use what you have, and when you see these guys with their pants down (and I've seen all kinds of guys with their pants down), you really get a sense of the humanity of America and Americans and how all the threads really do tie everything together and my methods work for me, there is no judgment though some may insist on judging. You have to understand what the important judgment really is: are you an American or are you not? Do you care or do you not? Not everything I do can be as perfect as I want it to be but the important thing is, I'm building, I'm going somewhere with this. There's a place for me somewhere in this administration and I just have to find it, and I'm a determined American woman with a big heart and it's not like others don't do the things I do. There are times when I'm in the middle of these things and all I can do is visualize the American flag because it still means something, that red, white, and blue is woven into my entire body and my whole brain and everything else. The times where anyone can say screw it are over and done with, and it's time for the real Americans to stand up and do what needs to be done so that the red, white, and blue don't fade into the kind of blackness I see all around me in Washington. To think, I could've wasted my life.

The father's gaze (depending which gaze you happen to be referring to) is panoptic. It goes in without leaving traces. So if you have several fathers that leave no traces, & merely invisible gazes, there is or maybe a sense in which you have no fathers. I saw
all this happening to me, along with every thing else, many years ago, before I could visualize the cell I was in, before I knew how the walls stank of fresh paint, or saw that I was getting smeared at any juncture. But, as I saw this, my father who was my father turned, spoke down to me in such a way that I listened. I took what he said, gazed at my cell, and watched the paint dry deep into the night before I busted out to watch the dawn break over the Delaware.

#1646

A ring of retards, she said to herself, a ring of retards. It was her turn to speak, speak she did, but she watched herself the whole time, thinking how dumb the whole thing would look to one of her old friends, in the days when she (and they) ruled the world, because the world was so tiny and they could encompass it. She gets up to piss, and notices nothing. She’s still gorgeous and she knows it, that’s that. Yes, I saw this happen, I was down there with them. But then, you don’t know who I am, do you, and does it matter?

54

#1647

She told me I love boy/girl poems, love scenes in them based on a deep degeneracy inherited from too much heat around my genitals, as manifest in tangents I could only see if I was getting laid. She told me this as I was getting laid in such a way that any notion
of telling was subsumed in an ass as stately as a mansion, which I filled with the liquid cobwebs of my imagination. There was grass outside being smoked in a car in which another boy/girl scenario played out in a brunette giving a fine performance of Bolero in her movements,

and I immediately flashed back to the deep genitals of my first girlfriend and the way she used to implore God’s help at certain moments, who was certainly watching this. That’s it, that’s the whole spiel I have on boy/girl poems and why they are hated by the dry dunces who love them.

Oh you guys, you guys are tough. I came here to write about some thing, but now that I came, I can’t come to a decision about what I came for. What? You said I can’t do this? You said it’s not possible
because it’s a violation and not a moving one? It’s true, you guys are tough. You know I have tried, at different times, to please you in little ways, but this one time I had this student that was giving me head

and she stopped in the middle to tell me that I had good taste and you had bad taste, and I’ll admit it, I believed her. She was your student too, maybe you’ve seen her around. She’s the one with the scarves and the jewelry and the jewels and the courtesy to give the teachers head who deserve it. Do you?

What’s this about making moves, said the apprentice? I’ve got irons in the fire with all these pieces, isn’t that enough? To have mastered how the fire works, so that each piece burns right down: it’s not the only move that matters, but as I just made a line of rooks rather than
pawns, what else could possibly get my goat? The master heard this, appearing limber, but quite chained to the voices that were taking away the tools he used to put his apprentices in their places. I have nothing to say about this, he said, as he wiped beads of sweat from a brow that furrowed so intensely that all his enemies insisted he had dark ties. Just make rows of rooks instead of pawns, and you will find yourselves kings and queens. They all left him that night, after dumping the ashes in a river that ran in back of the workshop, into a black sea.

The traces of this woman, who is a woman, go all over the world, as I don’t objectify what I have no need to objectify. Can you guess who she is? Can you guess why I would need to write in code so that all the little poets don’t place me in brine vats? I heard him say all this, and let me tell you, it was sickening. Haven’t we heard how bodies in text are obsolescent? This is where I jumped in, and I am the final eye, that sees all. Black and white impulse, red veins. Pleasures.
closed to a
tee, it is a

picture of
me as me in
a movie of
me that’s a

vision of me
as an “I” in
a picture of
an old movie

I am is,
in saying,
like being

in woods,
like leaves,
like trees,

like a place
to rest after
you know

what I mean.

O life, O time, dark dark dark & all that, that bit, where you confront all that won’t submit, it’s nobody’s favorite bit, it’s a bloody miracle we ever get anything else, yet you never hear talk of it except in art, &
it’s gone out of fashion, right from Milton’s front page into the dark dark dark, but it’s still dark as a mudslide, & as dense

#509

There are gusty showers in Philadelphia, showers that beat up empty lots, down in sooty Kensington, you could almost believe what the books say about being-in-the-world, I mean being in a damned world, it really does seem that way on greasy days in Philadelphia.

#510

Whaddya know, she said, you’ve coined a phrase we can all use, just by keeping your mouth shut, just by whistling past the dust-bins, hat in hand, hand in glove, gloved from tyranny by a left-handed smoke shifter, a bloody miracle, she said

59

#511

It’s all so anxious, this living, panting realizations of what
isn’t, could
never be,
sky doesn’t
care, earth
doesn’t care,
mud-soaked
leaves—

#512

as if I would strike you,
as if I, myself, were pushing
your face away, fists livid
against yr soft, wasp-y cheeks.
in some other world my parts
bear nectar, my hands clasp
your own like wonted shelter.
in some other dream your
eyes don’t freeze but melt,
sugar cubes smashed by light.

#521

It is in the thing
that impels hands
forward, what curls
into fists, coiled
laughter, shaded
disclosures, every
inflection of every 
emphatic shove of 
feeling into flesh.

It is consciousness 
behind, above, below 
me, only me, as I 
am writing an “it” that 
is me, that crosses 
arms in healing flame-
lit gestures, that creeps 
down echoes of 
creeping vines, re-
collected in affinity 
with an “it” that is it, 
being me.

Your arms 
 oppress me; 
 my deep 
 exhaustion 
 plagues 
 you like 
 tax-forms. 
 Think of 
 waves of 
 honey, 
 tides of 
 butter, all 
 melting 
 into a dense, 
 impregnable 
 bind— 
 if this is 
 the lease, 
 I’ll sign.

Dressed to kill, 
 I go insane as I 
 think of killing 
 you in undressing, 
 a sense of weird 
 lightning bottled
inside me wells
up spontaneously,
I'm tearing at my
body's corners, I
can't stop thinking
of jumps into ether,
memorandums, just
love, whatever it
means, whatever it
is, whatever it
wants to be inside
us, a harlequin, a
moose, a daffodil,
a way of explosives
going off in a row
& corn being mowed in
Iowa, Illinois, or "I."

What will the poem,
a wary protuberance,
say to admixtures of
green grassy gardens
sprung sans respite, &
hood winked dudes?
Not to implicate you,
but someone must
choose, truly, when
this linzer tart stands
eating my plate, in
spite of all spite with-
held, beyond all dreams
you can measure, near
a fracas which seems
risible. Not that I care.

Lawyers I know do blow.
Every line is crass. Books
line their well-ordered flats
that look out on views that
might as well be New York.
Amped up, 13th St. gleams
like Central Park, Woody’s
like a petting zoo for fruits.
I watch for lines of truth.
Tomes, philosophy— queer.
What would Marx say here?
That jobless attorneys stave
off ennui by nose-dripped
ecstasy, made a commodity?

Oh, she was really cute,
but she just doesn’t get it. I mean, she has these
perfect little blue eyes,
and our feet were almost
touching, but she kept
talking about other girls. It didn’t help that I had to hear her whole stupid life story about growing up in fucking Reading. Now she wants to open up a shop with sex toys and a café. I mean, that’s fine, but it was all about her, I couldn’t get a word in edgewise, and now I can’t go into the bar where she works because I sort of don’t want to see her. But I’m still attracted to her too. I swear to God, all these fucking hick girls come to the city and they can’t handle it. I wanted to tell her, listen, sister, don’t mess around with a girl that’s been around. You’re cute but I could fuck you over if I wanted to. I’ve got skills that you don’t. What’s the point? She’ll learn soon enough.

I was fucking this girl in the ass, late at night, and I looked out into the parking lot across the street and moonlight glistened on the cars, I thought, that’s it, I don’t give a shit
anymore, you can take your America, shove it up your ass just like I’m doing here, that’s when I came, and it was a good long one.

I stood naked, a disappeared text, dissolved in more text that was done in French, smudged lines, heart-shaped erasures, crossings, a witch, not such a bluebird as she was when I listened to her in a bar, stoned in Rockford, letter stored in her belly, tugging.

Like the lamp by your bed with no shade and the Stein books you never read on your shelf and the sweat that rolls down the crack of your ass when we fuck (the smell of driven slush),
Like the granules these things are or may be, as I tell you what it is you like about me discussing in bits your bits that form a kind of trinity hovering above the places you place plants,

but it is not nor shall ever be like anything else again, as there is no simile for the marks of incredibly bright weakness around your eyes as you lounge around in your panties, two blues, guess which?

Angie did not arrive to white me out—alone in bed, 3 am, I smoked butts, blue lights, haze-
like, spinning, an
girl’s halo— I felt
dirty, upbraided by
blueness, as if it
showed me what
I was past
entanglements,
redness in me
atrophied— I
would have been
better, I thought,
inside Angie,
butt-fucking.
That’s what
was in dreams
once the haze left.

Words are spirits,
words wording
through us like
savored pulp.
Words, strained
or comatose,
plucking laurel
for some lucky
fuck. Substantive
spirit words, cored &
pitted, wait to be bit
like knowledge of
good & evil, stems.
Not a cask or a flask—
some vessel from
nether regions of
Venus. Easy to be
dispirited, cored,
yet stem systems are
permanent. Say them.

#547

Spirit melts, leaving
butter particles strewn
along leaf-veined avenues—
how absurd, that it should
be in poetry, hiding there
like a cat in a dry bath-tub,
like water in a drain, like
so much dark moon.

#549

I'm conscious of freedom, how it
flares against brick, how it stirs.
Yellow backs of combatants, &
chain-gang commerce in armor,
mind-forged manacles scraped,
muscle-displays in time’s diaspora.
Lastly, they turn away from facts,
look instead at trunk-scissions,
leafy morasses, all over small-town America, steeple chased.
I'm conscious of this, of my own yellow writing it down, seated.

Guns are connected to power; you want to shoot because you are shot, you want to kill because you are killed, you like nature because it happens to be easy. Your mouth, as you kill, is a waft of rodent-dirt, you rats. I see myself as a kind of tree behind all this, not that I'm solid or stolid, just that I can absorb the prickly twitch of your whiskered faces. I have no problem with ferreting out small animals. What if it turns out they want to be elected; hope?

I'd love to enter you this way—go, stop, go; go, stop, go; until
I could fill
your canvas
w/ presence;
I’d love to
turn you
onto yourself;

you, who,
yourself, are,
spatially,
two-in-mouth,
knees-at-hip,
entered.

#555

Wood-floored bar on Rue St. Catharine—
you danced, I sat, soused as Herod,
sipped vodka tonic, endless bland
medley belting out of the jukebox—
you smiling, I occupied keeping you happy,
un-frazzled— suddenly sounds behind us,
the bar wasn’t crowded & a patron
(rakish, whisker-flecked big mouth)
lifted a forefinger at beer-bellied
bartender bitching back, soon a real
fight, violence in quiet midnight,
I, scared, got you out of there

but you had to dance, you said,
had to dance so we paved Plateau, tense steps,
found nothing, you started crying & stamping
your feet like a child, I grabbed you & dragged
you back to our room you stripped, curled
into fetal position, beat your fists against
the mattress, in this way you danced
through the night, dozed & woke ready for more—

#564

in your “not-I”
saying is sex
phonemes go
fricatives fill
in space for “I”
it’s all I said
(was I saying
anything red
for yr blood in
you at all for
being me?)

#565

Battle for deliverance,
struggle for salvation,
Christ’s passion condensed
into ten fluid seconds,
sections of flesh leaving,
sense of “Geist” overhead.
Yet you’ve shrunk before
Romance into “post-
everything entropy,” so
even the love of one’s
life becomes another show,
rigged like a government’s
actions, glommed onto
deadly ennui. Christ.

#567

Oh, to be half in love in New York—
moments of almost caress in Union Square,
almost embrace in Alphabet City,
almost consummation on Brooklyn F Train—
remembering confessions at Fez,
Lafayette Place, eruptions of late-night
mania on Broadway, lusts at
Ludlow Street’s Living Room,
I wonder what half of us could’ve fallen—now, I’m half at ease
w/ memories of half a love,
half lived in livid, lurid Times Square, also smog-red Hudson
sunsets spent on half-lit banks,
hand-in-hand, hoping for an omen
from doldrums of a half-dead city—

#571

Of course, there had to be
a pretty nurse—this one was
pale blonde, thin, always in
jeans, fat iron cross affixed
to breast-heavy chest. I
couldn’t ignore eye-teeth
that made her look like a
vampire. In my pill-popped
dementia, I saw her kneel
beside my bed, swill blood
from my neck, nourish
herself on my sickness.
In swoons, a Christian
vampire seems no weirder
than enforced Twister,
watched Monopoly, or
face-painting forty-year-olds:
she fit right in. That’s the bin.

#572

On the bus to fifth
grade, eleven years
old, I couldn’t breathe,
you had to call an
ambulance, put me
on oxygen. My father
arrived, shaking and
crying: “First my mother,
now my son.” I loved him so much, it didn’t seem strange that, upon leaving the hospital, he returned me to school in time for math class.

#562

I see you foraging through weeds in a field; it’s spring, air streaked green. I’m with you in the field: I’m mud, or grass, I’m beneath your nails, held fast. Bark flakes off me. You pass on, satisfied. Branches sway, flecked by tongues—look at my garden’s sprawl; do you see me here, or in the air?

#577

You can only transcribe by dying, the things you transcribe are dying, the way you transcribe is dying by the time you transcribe,
so if you must transcribe, you must die, or die trying
HAND IN GLOVE: PHOTOGRAPH (JEREMY ERIC TENENBAUM) AND ESSAYS (ADAM FIELED)
PREFACE

Though we enjoyed working with him in PFS, the darkness around Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum was profound. Expressed astrologically (though Jeremy himself considered astrology a pseudo-science), Jeremy was born with the sun in Cancer; and the planet Saturn was also in Cancer, forming a tight conjunction with his sun (6-27-74). Translated into practical terms, no matter how much artifice he joyfully and willfully imposed on those around him, there was always something eating away at his peace of mind. He was never comfortable, nor was he willing to comfort anyone else. He wasn’t a drug abuser, but he was a heavy drinker— and, when he had wheels, he drove drunk. Many times I refused to get in the car with drunken Jeremy at the wheel— Mike and Nick didn’t, necessarily. The three of them weren’t always moored to any healthy shore; nor did they feel they had any special reason to value their lives.

Jeremy’s obsession with adolescents and adolescence was also creepish— he was compulsively opposed to adult behaviors and concerns. Still, in this handful of photographs, we see all that was best in Jeremy— the offhanded and effortless ability to shock through novel perspectives and compositions; an electric charge around bisexual eroticism and even troilism; and a sense of Philadelphia itself as a love object, to be wooed, fondled, and bedded. I named this collection “Hand in Glove” after the Smiths’ song; and it needs to be said that Smiths/Morrissey fandom was an extreme fetish for Mr. Tenenbaum. He was known (he hastened to tell anyone who inquired) as one of the great Smiths authorities on the Eastern seaboard. Every time Morrissey released an album it was an event— more than once, I celebrated the occasion with Jeremy in Manayunk. Jeremy was a man of compartments, and the Smiths/Morrissey compartment was a large one; the “murderous desire for love” from “The Boy with the Thorn in His Side” was his too.

It also needs to be noted that Jeremy began as a poet. At Villanova University in the Philly suburbs, under the tutelage of Dr. Eli Goldblatt (who later migrated to Temple while I was there and briefly served on my committee), he studied Modernist poetry intensively, with a special emphasis on Ezra Pound. Jeremy was at home with Pound’s Cantos and “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” and never lost a Poundian bias where poetics were concerned. Around the turn of the century, he was twice published in the Columbia Poetry Review, a mid-level avant-garde print journal out of Columbia University Chicago. What he thought of my books I’ll never know— by the time the books began to appear, he had disowned me. He had also stepped up his drinking and grown portly. I learned through the grapevine that he was working on an epic
novel, under the twisted, cacophonous influence of Thomas Pynchon (“Gravity's Rainbow” was another fetish for him) and John Barth. I knew Jeremy was on a downward trajectory and guessed the novel would never appear, and it didn’t. He probably counted (knowing his perversity) on posthumous publication.

For me, these photographs trump anything Jeremy accomplished in literature (at least, so far). Posturing is kept to a minimum, and what we have is an eye for quirk, oddity, and what chance circumstances create which is worth capturing and preserving. If we never quite see the “murderous desire for love” emerge, Jeremy might’ve left something in his files to take care of that later. However painful and tawdry the end of his life might’ve been, there is still the sense, for those of us who knew and intermittently loved him, that Jeremy, with his penchant for generating shocks and surprises, might have more worthwhile material waiting for us somewhere. Jeremy approved of the Pynchonian trope of the secret underground conspiracy and/or system, and perhaps his is only beginning to operate.

Adam Fieled, 2013
Shock, Sigmund Freud wrote, is the necessary precursor to orgasm. I do not remember the source text, or the context. It is interesting to consider the implications of this remark—why, if we grant Freud his premise, sharp and pungent sensations experienced by the brain can produce correspondingly extreme physical reactions. One implication concerns art, whose task it is to create and sustain sharp and pungent brain sensations, which can resound physically as well. What could be more shockingly sharp, and pungent, than queerness doubled, then redoubled ad infinitum? Here, in Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum’s “Portrait: Two Girls in a Bed,” queerness has the potentiality not only to signify lesbianism but the queer, as in the strange, the eerie, the noir, even (from the perspective of stability and standardized portraiture expectations) the disconsolate. This is, to paraphrase Barthes, not a work of standardized
pleasure but of forceful (perhaps fearful), shock-inducing bliss. The foreplay it forces is to watch singles double and significations in general multiply (as questions self-generate, it is easy to imagine the photo a newfangled Grecian Urn)—whether the girls are lovers or not, and why one is fully dressed and the other nude; why the artist has created, out of his own shocking perversity, a perspective from which the girls are watching something we can’t see, what it might be and what their shocks are against ours; how the exterior, red walls of the bedroom (which are shocking to begin with) have metaphorical, physical and metaphysical doubles in several directions (once the triangle is formulated of the artist and the two girls); and the pure, blunt attractiveness of the nude wrapped in a bed-sheet in the foreground, whose bulging blue eyes have in them an intimation which splits between physical violence and orgasmic release (and over whom a projection of “butch” or “butchness” may or may not apply).

The girl in a bed-sheet covers one level of singular meaning— that she is the muse of the photo. She is, in fact, a muse worthy of Manet—frank, but with a streak of coyness which elevates her over Olympia; and as breathtaking, in this context, as the mistress of Luncheon on the Grass. If she, and this piece, resonates as contemporary in 2013, it is because photography as a medium, particularly American photography, is customarily not rich enough, formally or thematically, to carry the nuances, innovations, or multiple meanings of classic and classicist European art. Multiple meanings and nuances don’t have to create a sense of the ponderous (as Americans are wont to suggest); here, as in Abby Heller-Burnham’s “The Walls Have Ears,” the shock tactics employed engender not only arousal (sexual, emotional, and/or intellectual) but giddiness, the aesthetic equivalent of a line of cocaine (the sight of which was no stranger to Freud). To speak in the parlance of Center City Philadelphia, it can get you high, and off.

The evidence is irrefutable—no one who has ever been shocked into an awareness of their physical sexual instincts is unfamiliar with queerness. Sex is strange. While you gaze at your lovers, they’re looking at something or someone else. Another jolt into awareness: who has more power, the nude or the clothed? Intermittent or partial nudity has many shocks built into it—one reason Tenenbaum makes Robert Mapplethorpe’s nudes look unimaginative, cold, and clinical. New York’s cocaine buzzes around the arts have always been cold ones; Philadelphia in the Aughts (when this was taken) was warmer, stranger, and giddier. The seeds it planted towards further multiplications have only begun to blossom, against the American grain and producing the necessary friction for meaningful conception to occur.
To conventional wisdom, the poetry of the American urban landscape is that there is none. The average American metropolitan area is an ugly mess, and built for the convenience of commerce, rather than for the delectation of cultivated eyes. Philadelphia is a Gemini city—and the inversions and ironies about the way Philly looks up close are profound and twisted. Cursed for a century with a self-hating, self-defeating press corps, Philly becomes as famously ugly as Detroit, Houston, or Phoenix (“it’s a working class city” blurs idiot Garrison Keillor on NPR). The truth is that Philly may be the most ambient city in America. There are too many visual feasts which Philly presents (and that are conspicuously absent in New York, Chicago, etc) to dismiss comparisons not only to the rest of America but to Paris, London, and Prague. Speaking of “ambience”; it’s a term with French connotations, as it signifies a certain ineffable charm places can have, and rational, thoughtful Brits (if not my blood-fellows, the Irish) do not care for the vagueness of raw sensation and charm. You could call ambience “visual mojo” and it would mean the same thing. Philly’s visual mojo works profoundly on many levels—one key aspect is that, in some neighborhoods, Philly makes dilapidation look ambient. This is especially the case if a practiced eye selects and captures a synecdoche of the visual mojo, as Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum has done in “South Philly Power Lines.”

The issue of chance and composition is important here—that, as sophisticated flaneurs know, daily life has in it vistas opening onto the gorgeous and the spectacular, if you know where and how to look, and the manner in which you look can spontaneously create painterly compositions par excellence. This “found” composition is bizarre, and unique to South Philadelphia—horizontals and verticals (including gaudy holiday decorations) set against a crepuscular sky (which creates its own ambience of expectation and natural dynamism) in such
a way that all the urban detritus is etherealized and thus made delicious and sublime. It also oddly balances humanism and naturalism—the sky and the power lines achieving consummation and fertilizing each other. South Philly, especially the Italian Market neighborhood where Jeremy took this, has the visual stock-in-trade of glamorous dilapidation—the streets and shops look pleasantly weathered, and there has been little renovation over the past half-century. The ambience which subsists in the Italian Market is timeless, and closer to the earth than almost any neighborhood in Manhattan. The twentieth century encouraged extreme renovation in urban America—certain parts of Philly saw the wisdom in rebuffing the trend from the inside.

You can still buy fruits, vegetables, fish and fowl from street-stalls in the Italian Market on weekdays—renovation and modernization have left its folkways intact. Having an eye which actually chooses to see the city you live in is a folkway which has largely been lost over the last half-century in America—and that sense of ocular interest merits some renovation. What “South Philly Power Lines” does is to create a sight matrix around Philadelphia, and challenge other artists in other places (particularly in once-vaunted, fading New York) to see if they can artistically encapsulate other sight matrixes. I myself don’t know if this can be done anywhere in America other than Philadelphia. I’ll wait with some eagerness to see what New York does in response. If New York, with its wonted bloated pomposity, chooses to ignore this, it will languish, because Jeremy’s pictures (and other PFS work) are a watershed moment in American art. This particular piece has the uncanny charm of making the humble grandiose.

Adam Fieled, 2013
To say something about the relationship between Mike Land and Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum— I don’t know how far it went. They might’ve been lovers. That’s certainly what this portrait suggests. When we were together as a threesome without Nick, we would sometimes do queer-consonant things. Upstairs at the Khyber, they had a DJ night in the mid-Aughts called “Feytality.” I went once with Mike and Jeremy. It was the Smiths, the Kinks, Belle and Sebastian, and New Romantics stuff. Where Mike Land and queerness were concerned, there was no doubt about it— he was active. With Jeremy, I could never tell— he had all kinds of wistful boy-crazy fantasies, but also liked to keep his options open about what he was willing to divulge and what he wasn’t.

What this portrait expresses to me is tenderness and reciprocity between the two artists. Mike could be tender in more than one sense— he could express a caring kind of tenderness towards others, and he had sore points and needed to be handled gingerly, too. Jeremy was a raving lunatic in comparison— he expressed tenderness in his art if not his life. All those levels were awkward for me, both towards Jeremy and Mike— most of my tenderness was directed towards women. When I first met Jeremy, years before PFS, and he would suddenly act flatulently gay, I’d get embarrassed. But I also suspected he was faking it, and gayness for him was just another artificial posture. In hindsight, I still don’t know if this was true. So much of this history and its participants is now lost in the bars of Manayunk and Roxborough that it may never be retrieved— Jeremy was loud, but conversely by far the most secretive of the four of us, and his posturing was used to willfully obfuscate whatever was
really there. Mike, in the right context, would hit you with his bisexual seduction routine in twenty minutes flat. As twisty as his wallet was, with sex he was an above-boards player, an all-purpose one, and a consummate one too.

When Mike and Jeremy were “on,” Nick became a comically nervous child. I, a firmly straight man with an intellect and a college (in the UK, university) education, was a palliative for him then, up to and including our visits to Woody’s, where Jeremy’s hamming was used to cover...what? Make no mistake— at Woody’s, Mike was the meat man. Jeremy would be happy to tell you how jealous he was, so you would know he really wasn’t, and would chunter on like Oscar Wilde, etc. Mike’s moves always fed part of Jeremy’s soul and made him garrulous. My trick at Woody’s (I taught it to Nick) was not to look anyone in the eyes too long; bury your head in your drinks. I was comfortable, but wary. Jeremy was right— Mike was entertaining to watch.

Mike was entertaining to watch with girls, too. He was good at taking calculated risks—what his hands were doing was the secret. I never saw him make a pass too fast, or too slow. He was graceful and agile, and, the way their unique chemistry worked, Jeremy would (for once) hold himself in reserve and talk to others as he watched. The panic button for me was this: if Mike makes a score, I get left alone with Nick and Jeremy together (a handful of chalk and a handful of cheese). It was like trying to mediate between Oscar Wilde and Charles Darwin. I wonder if Jeremy’s left any records of “did he or didn’t he.” Knowing how querulous he was about staging ambiguities, probably not. Ambiguities and artifice were part of his crab shell; all those hidden Manayunk side-streets were a rather formidable crab-shell too. In art, Jeremy was certainly Mike Land’s lover. He could express the tenderness he may or may not have been able to express physically (to Mike or anyone else). The truth is rarely pure and never simple— perhaps sometimes he did and sometimes he didn’t. Or, perhaps the breeder here should just shut up.

Adam Fieled, 2013
Three of the four major Free School guys were based in Center City Philadelphia. Jeremy was the only one based somewhere else— in Manayunk/Roxborough, a section of the city hinging on the Main Line and northern suburbs. Manayunk has a special glamour against both the suburbs and Center City— although the whole of the ‘hood consists of one thoroughfare (Main Street) and a dozen side streets running perpendicular to it. Main Street has posh boutiques, restaurants, bars, art galleries, and even a pool hall— all standard stuff, but torqued towards enchantment by how Main Street looks. New York has no parallel, nor does L.A.; Chicago has Wicker Park and North Milwaukee Avenue (the best, most precise analogue I’ve seen to Manayunk); D.C. has Adams Morgan; and London, Convent Gardens. Main Street, for a popular section of an American metropolis, is charming and quaint; none of the buildings which constitute the block are more than two or three stories high— and because Main Street does not sport many chain retail outlets, many of the facades and awnings are distinct and unique.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Manayunk has its own art scene— sort of. When I moved to Philly at precisely the turn of the century, Jeremy (the first of the three other foundation Free School guys I met; had, in fact, met in Manayunk in ’97 on a semester break from PSU) was trying to jump-start Manayunk on this level, with a crew of poets and artists
around something called ‘d’ magazine. Jeremy had already set himself into a mold— he liked to create a scenario around him in which he got to “play papa” to a brood of adorable, borderline-twee young aesthetes, with tastes groomed and adjusted by him. This was one reason PFS was never that satisfying for Jeremy— as a Cancer, he liked to stay sequestered in Manayunk/Roxborough, and we were in Center City— and Mike and I were running the show. When Jeremy attempted to “play papa” with us, we just ignored him; and, with me at the helm, PFS was never going to be twee. As soon as PFS ended, Jeremy jumped back into a context not unlike ‘d’ magazine.

Still, Jeremy had a magical Cancerian quality for me of embodying the quaintness of Manayunk’s charm and glamour. The magical vista Jeremy creates in “At the Manayunk Train Station” is a collusion of the sacred and the profane, to create a startling composition, whose verticals and horizontals do a majestic trick against the starkness of the blue sky. Jeremy’s flaneur streak meant that he had a scattershot approach to art and photography— he liked to leave things up to chance. He always carried around a digital camera with him, and whenever we’d drink in Manayunk, he’d snap and click away. I had my own quirky feelings about Manayunk— for some reason, it only “worked” for me during the spring and summer months, especially spring. Main Street Manayunk in May is one vision of heaven I have. Jeremy had an uncanny ability in Manayunk to blend into the scenery to such an absurd extent that he might as well have been one of the boutiques, after one of which I named one of my best songs— “Worn Yesterday.” “La Tazza,” where Jeremy set up shop on Cotton Street, was also one of the last places on the East Coast Jeff Buckley performed before he drowned in ’97. In Center City, it was never as good. Jeremy, also, was only at his best in Manayunk, where I saw him many times— I’m not sure Mike or Nick ever did.

The sadness of Manayunk, if its there, is that small places tend to engender small lives— and, if you aren’t willing to make an effort to expand, if you just submit passively, your life may contract into nothingness if you remain there. The shell which protects also confines. Yet Jeremy had his moments and his visions, and if I can make the good ones stick, I see no reason not to.

Adam Fieled, 2013
The specter of alcoholism did loom over the Philly Free School—less so for me than for Mike, Nick, and Jeremy. Mike and Nick were perpetual barflies—it was a lifestyle choice they made (not only was Anna Land also a barfly, the whole Land clan had booze in their blood). The bar scene in Aughts Philly did have a hinge to glamour (I often wondered if it did in preceding decades), and, if you hit the right bar at the right time, you might think you’d found a racy version of Shangri-La. That’s what I get from Jeremy’s portrait of Mike at The Dive in South Philly in the late Aughts—a sense of celestial peace. Given the contexts in which he lived, it was an odd quirk of Mike Land’s character (not shared by Anna) which I often noticed—he could be peaceful and, given the right congenial reception (especially if it included free drinks or weed), knew how to relax. He was also openly critical of my workaholic approach to the arts, and was wont to laugh at how overextended I was. On the other hand, I would note to myself, he was only too happy to take advantage of my workaholism and make his mark as my numero uno wing-man in the Philly Free School. Where bar-stool savoir faire was concerned, I couldn’t compete—Mike Land had “it” and I didn’t.

Though it skirts viciousness to say so, Jeremy really didn’t have either—he was only creative intermittently, and his bar-stool style was too bizarre and blubbery to attract many acolytes (Mike and Nick, especially together, were never at a loss for acolytes). He’d appear to be digging in to some obscure French literature and repeatedly shoot nervous glances in all directions. In some ways, Jeremy never got over being a narcissistic adolescent—he always
acted as if everyone was watching him. If I had a bar-stool flaw, it was lechery. If I saw a woman I fancied, I’d get twitchy, wanting to approach her and being paranoid that someone would beat me to the punch. Mike Land was more casual and less urgent about such biz, and Nick was relatively lust-innocent. By the time Jeremy snapped this portrait, the square had collapsed utterly. When Mike would visit from L.A., he kept a low profile. I’m guessing (though I don’t know) that Mike and Jeremy ran into each other at The Dive by chance.

Jeremy, by the late Aughts, was a blubbery character in general. He was desperate enough to call his then-newfangled reading series “Toiling in Obscurity,” and affix the tag-line “even our minor accomplishments are overshadowed by our utter anonymity” to ads for it. It seemed to me he never recovered from the Free School years; nor was he big or mature enough to admit it. Jeremy was a slave to emotions he pretended not to have. Mike, who was raised by a therapist mother and had a candid streak, less so. Mike’s gaze here is candid— it seems to be a moment of respite from worldly concerns for him. The animating contradiction of the portrait is between earthiness and ethereality. That the peace of heaven could descend upon a bar in South Philly is interesting— Mike’s facial expression and the perfectly balanced (and painterly) composition have something ineffable in them.

It’s a captured moment of visual ecstasy with many levels of torment behind it. I never saw Jeremy in an ecstatic mood— he was supremely self-conscious, and went out of his way to impose his vision of artifice on everyone. Jeremy’s camera eyes were better than he was. This is a night which I would’ve ruined for Jeremy had I been there. I was already doing grown-up things like putting out books and reading in foreign cities. Some of my books were being taught at major universities (I mentioned this in a conversation I had with Jeremy at around this time). By being grown-up, I had broken Jeremy’s sacred faith of Peter Pan-ism. We mutually considered the other’s gold foolish.

Adam Fieled, 2013
On Philadelphia Rock Music
Preface

The Philadelphia art scene in the Aughts was more than reasonably well-rounded. The Philly Free School’s niche involved mostly “haute” or high culture; but many of us were also rock musicians. Abby and I were. Part of our nightlife had to do with rock music, and the Philly venues where we played and watched our friends play— the Khyber, the Pontiac Grille (a.k.a. J.C. Dobbs), Tritone, Doc Watson’s, Johnny Brenda’s, and, of course, the ever-anomalous Highwire Gallery. By the late Aughts, the Eris Temple had come into its own as a venue too. The good music produced by Philadelphia rock artists in the Aughts shares many aesthetic characteristics with the paintings and books which constitute the core of the Philly Free School’s achievement; Philadelphia Rock Music, as I call it, tends to be dark, brooding, menacing, and elliptical. Zach Sulat’s songs add whimsy and restraint to the equation; his Soft People album, “The Vapors” (’07), is a psychedelic masterpiece. It isn’t just elliptical but spacy, and space-rock is another sub-genre which recurs in Philadelphia Rock Music.

On another extreme end, noise-rock demolition artists Radio Eris hurl gobs of spit in the face of propriety, with their post-industrial, post-apocalyptic approach. The album I recorded with Matt Stevenson of Radio Eris in 2004, “Ardent,” explores the limits of lo-fi classic rock and garage guitar herocics; and the dynamics of Gaetan Spurgin’s best late-Aughts songs puts classic rock imperatives in a blender with Brit-Pop in a raw, unplugged context. Dawn Ananda Hulton and the Nooses have something in common with the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, approach-wise; hard-edged avant-rock with a charismatic female vocalist out front. Dawn Ananda Hulton is, indeed, one of the great rock pin-ups of all time; a pixie-faced goddess with a guitar. Natalie Mering’s approach has more in common with Nico’s; she’s a mood/texture oriented chanteuse. She employs keyboard drones and legato phrasing in an ambient way. Her stage presence suggests high priestess, rather than goddess. Oral Sex Suicide is Dan Baker, who also plays guitar for Radio Eris; his signature song, “Cock Hostage,” has the classic barfly quality of Tom Waits at his best, and for many reasons can stand as an Aughts-in-Philly anthem.

One obvious point to make about Philadelphia Rock Music is this— since none of these artists achieved more than local recognition for their music during the Aughts, and because none of them were moved to compromise their respective visions to do so, these are all artists who maintained a certain amount of integrity in relation to the music business. They wished to make music their way, or not at all. The short-term loss for many gifted Philly musicians was terrible; especially with an abusive and pathetic local music press corps. But it is my hope that Philadelphia Rock Music will eventually receive its due, in relevant sectors. This was a unique scene, with a unique ethos. Its closest analogue is Midtown Memphis in the 70s; another unique scene which produced both memorable images and memorable music, and mixed higher and lower disciplines rampantly. If Philadelphia and Memphis both began left-of-center, they might move to the center together, against perceived centers which have worn out their potency. It’s more fortuitous, over long periods of time, for American art to be generated from more than one nexus, and to cherish a “multiple” lineage. Such is the case with Philadelphia Rock Music.

Adam Fieled, 2013
“Dawn Ananda Hulton”
“Gaetan Spurgin”
“The Soft People”
“Radio Eris”
“Album Cover: Adam Fieled’s “Ardent” by Matt Stevenson”
“Flier: Oral Sex Suicide at the Eris Temple”
“Album Cover: Dawn Ananda Hulton and the Nooses”
“Adam Fieled at Main Street West Studios, by Matt Stevenson”
“Dawn Ananda Hulton and the Nooses”
“Natalie Mering (A.K.A. Natalie Weyes Bluhd)”
“Zach Sulat and the Soft People”
“Advertisement: Oral Sex Suicide”
“The Bad News Bats”