

Beacons

this is your room / in Calle Visión // if you took the turn-off / it was for you

ADRIENNE RICH, "Calle Visión"

In pieces, in glimmers—

Trust him, take his hand.

A beacon shines through a cypress. Then our night is dark; the shoreline road is empty of cars.

Trust him, the beacon returns: each cypress branch curves like the tine of a wishbone. He and I clamber over rocks to the foot of the metal lighthouse with a concrete base; a distant foghorn sounds, and he begins to dematerialize beside me, as if he's being beamed off this world, until he is gone, obliterated from life. I can no longer picture his face. I call out his name. I see in the dimly lit archway of the lighthouse's door a soft, mustached man in blue scrubs. He beckons to me, and then turns to the other men standing, crouching, kneeling inside. I panic, walk hurriedly on through the dunes, to the calm ocean. In the shallows a tawny nurse shark thrashes. A boy, wading beside it, glancing at my mouth but averting my gaze, teases it with a dead mackerel over its snout, and it lunges. Foghorn blares. Sea-water warmer than it should be. Shark tears fish away from hand.

For two weeks—as I walk to the convenience store, do the dishes, or text on my smartphone—this imagistic storyline comes in pieces, in guttering flashes, bursts. And it's not solely visual. The retreat of the man cruising me, the pulsar of the lighthouse, the pendulum of the mackerel: as I feel "translations" of those movements—the pulling away, the spinning, the rocking—deep in my sinuses, in my midsection and legs, as I emotionally feel contours of excitement, love, sadness, and dread, the very intimate etymological kinship of "motion" and "emotion" becomes apparent. Though I don't smell or taste anything, sometimes I can hear the murmuring

babble of the men just inside the lighthouse, the splashing of the shark's caudal fin. On my neighborhood walks, I can't pass a Monterey cypress without recognition's static electricity running down the hairs of my back, up to the underwings of the shoulder blades, rippling up like live wires through the trapezius muscles to the base of skull, then spreading along the jawlines to the tender glands nesting there: a lump forms in the throat, tears fill the eyes. As when I picture my grandfather picking up the thick needles underneath his Norfolk Island pine. As when I imagine an alternate history: I'm at my senior prom in 1998 slow-dancing with a boy I love, and it's no big deal. Not just a daydream or a mental slideshow, my waking dreamscape with the lighthouse is essentially the same vivid, persistent experience of many artists, not just some priestly artistic elite. I call such an experience a vision. It spurs us to action: we sit and write.

His hand in mine. A foghorn sounds. Around the shaft of the lighthouse, a rusty staircase: the helix of it—like an orange rind peeled off and extended as a single corkscrew—dissolves, drips away like mercury, and he is gone.

"Vision? Yeah, I'd never use that word," a recovering Catholic friend of mine said when I brought up the topic. "It's pretentious." In the car was another talented poet, his first book having recently won a prestigious prize, who added, "I'd call it an idea, imagination." I can understand why contemporary poets, especially my age and younger, hesitate to speak of visions. Tell your poetry workshop or your therapist or your mother that you've been having a vision and see how that pans out.

The vision I've described, though, isn't a hallucination—I don't mistake it for part of the tangible world. It's neither a prophetic revelation like John's red dragon devouring a baby nor an instance of transverberation, the angel continually impaling Teresa of Avila with a spear—"this I thought he thrust through my heart several times, and that it reached my very entrails," she writes in her autobiography—her pain becoming a celestial marriage's divine ecstasy. No bearded deity, championing my art, uploads heartrending imagery into my brain. Against an infinite backdrop of mystery, laying aside concepts such as mysticism and the supernatural, what I can say is that this vision had a life of its own. At the very least, memories became stranger, more urgent composite imagery—unbidden, insistent on being experienced over and over until enacted on the page. My definition thus goes beyond the third sense listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "A mental concept of a distinct or vivid kind; an object of mental contemplation, esp. of an attractive or fantastic character; a highly imaginative scheme or anticipation." At a local sports bar, over whiskey, an accom-

plished painter in camouflage pants tried defining it for me more accurately: “Vision is obsession.”

Concrete archway, scuttling. Why was he taken from me, why can't I remember his face? The foghorn sounds again.

Like a hypnotist with a fob, back and forth the boy swings the fish.

Two senses of the word “vision”—the episodic and the cumulative—need to be carefully distinguished. It's one thing to have a vision intermittently recur for two weeks—and quite another to have such touchstone events, over a lifetime of work, underlie an artistic vision narrowing, sharpening, deepening into greatness: one by one stars are born from dust clouds and form a galaxy. Toni Morrison and Herman Melville, John Milton and Adrienne Rich—they achieved greatness in their artistic vision, as did Giotto, the Middle Sepik River carvers of Papua New Guinea, Frida Kahlo, Mozart, and John Cage. Their art and its interpretations of the human condition will endure. William Cullen Bryant and Edith Wharton, Daniel Defoe and Odgen Nash—their work possesses comparatively less artistic vision, less aliveness and profundity, even though these artists may very well have had visions. Even the trashiest, most stereotypical romance novelist might have visions—he may toss and turn in bed until he scribbles down the scene of Francesca falling off her stallion, brawny Fabio catching her before she hits the mud—even if there isn't a durable artistic vision that complicates our understanding of life. Kindergarten artists have visions in the stereoscopic, magical way that small children do, but we wouldn't say that their finger-painted daisies demonstrate the artistic vision—the singular, lasting originality and humane depths—of van Gogh's sunflowers or Cezanne's bouquets. For an artist to matter, it's not enough for her to be spiritually insightful, imaginatively open, shamanistically powerful. Episodic visions don't necessarily translate into a cumulative artistic vision that is remarkable—though “remarkable” is so slippery, open to debate by the chorus of voices that defines the ever-changing canon.

The eyes of the mustached man try to bore through my sadness—he is hungry. Touch would be food.

Recently I met with a writer, one of my living heroes, to discuss newer poems of mine. “What's largely missing here,” my mentor said, resting her coffee cup on the table, “is a commitment to a central vision.” Direct yet kind, she worried that the poems caricatured sexual violence. That the

whimsical, ironic artifice undercut the potential seriousness and poignancy, with real implications for the direction of my future work. For the development of artistic vision. She did caution me that her comments were only her opinion. But artistic vision, though invisible and to an extent subjective, can be sensed, like knowing that pot roast is for dinner by sniffing the air of the house. She wasn't able to smell much of a poetic vision—this feedback, coming from a poet whose work is acknowledged by many for its vision, was difficult to hear. Her opinion matters to me. And I began asking myself difficult questions. Am I a sham? Will my work ever truly matter? Why do I write at all?

I looked at the poems again and could see how I had sabotaged their unfolding: the discourse and imagery of sadomasochism, a subculture in which I've never been an active participant, can become a tic; wordplay can devolve into emotionally deflective gibberish. Some poems were simply padding a collection that I really wanted to be, as my father likes to say, "done, finished, and through." I tell myself that Henri Cole, in his sequence "Apollo," expresses my poetic ideal: "To write what is human, not escapist: / that is the problem of the hand moving / apart from the body." And yet, because it is often aesthetically, politically valued, the compulsion to dissemble—to be decorative, glib, elliptical, faddish, nonsensical, melodramatic, or ironic—has been difficult for me to resist. Language itself is always at some remove from experience. Our unadorned, ordinary reality is not easy to bear: an aging body that will unpredictably sicken and die; a gorgeous planet, in the midst of the Sixth Mass Extinction, that we are trashing; comfort predicated on a plutocratic system of exploitation and gross inequality; and the fundamental, raw uncertainty of life itself.

But vision, as I understand it, requires openness, intellectual as well as moment-to-moment, to these hard truths. Receptivity, often imperfect, to what is at turns irritating, joyful, numbing, and painful. Ajahn Chah, a renowned Thai meditation teacher, puts the attitude in these terms: "Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become quieter and quieter in any surroundings. It will become still like a clear forest pool. Then all kinds of wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool." For meditators as well as artists, though, some of these "creatures"—loneliness, egolessness, traumatic flashbacks, nihilism, financial worries, a happiness so pure that one feels unworthy of it—can be uncomfortable and lead us to write and live out what is escapist, false. My mentor calls it "a loss of nerve"—the artist dashes off a cartoon instead of painting a richly textured fresco cycle.

In a distracted, frenzied age when we'd often rather look at a touch screen

than into human eyes, how are we to cultivate artistic vision? Deep patience and contemplation are increasingly scarce in what Cory Doctorow calls our “ecosystem of interruption technologies”—texts, tweets, emails, Instagram alerts, Grindr and Tinder pings, OkCupid notifications, phone calls, Skype calls, voicemails, instant messages, hyperlinks, pop-ups galore—that are rewiring our brains to engage with the world more superficially. As Nicholas Carr explores in his book *The Shallows*, researchers are only beginning to understand how our cognitive and emotional processing are changing. And in a similar vein, most editors have already realized that it’s now not uncommon for a poet to write a “genius” poem in the morning and submit it online to magazines later that afternoon. Feeling through an ambivalent political stance irreducible to a Facebook status update, solving seemingly intractable aesthetic and philosophical problems: as YouTube sensation Sweet Brown of Oklahoma City puts it: “Ain’t nobody got time for that.” Revision, ideally, should be like the slow weathering of rock.

But writing and publishing ASAP have very real, very legitimate economic motives. In order to leave the insecurity and humiliation of adjunct teaching, many poets feel they must submit to journals they don’t read and enter expensive first-book contests run by unknown or shady publishers. Given the tightly competitive job market, in which even two well-received books of poetry and a PhD are often not enough for an assistant professorship, “publish or perish” is a harsh reality beginning in graduate school. At times overconfident, anxious, and empty, I haven’t always journeyed far enough with my poems, as was the case with those my mentor critiqued. Some of my previously published work, especially one involving an enema and the end of the world, embarrasses me because I see now they are just silly drafts hastily sent out to fatten my curriculum vitae. At my most cynical, I think of poetry as just another rat race in which vision—and indeed craftsmanship—matters little compared to connections, selfies with dozens of likes, and a compelling life story.

Beacon after beacon, through cypress—without using the word “heart,” how can I tell the truth?

My hometown, like my vision, has a lighthouse. Downtown, twenty miles from the ocean. Fifty feet tall, concrete, with black stripes and three big picture windows, it stands beside Parking Garage 4 of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida. Until the bulb was replaced, the beacon shone so brightly into the windows of nearby Springfield homes that residents complained that it kept them up at night. It’s a symbol of FBC itself: a megachurch—taking up eleven city blocks, its Sunday school

classes arranged by zip code—that has been the unfortunate guiding light of my birthplace. The Southern Baptist Convention’s own vision statement begins, “Being fully committed to the proposition that Jesus Christ is the only hope for the world”—the living out of the word “only” is what makes this influential institution so dangerous and hurtful. After 9/11 a former pastor at the church made headlines by calling Mohammed “a demon-possessed pedophile.”

Recently FBC successfully lobbied the City Council to strike down a Human Rights Ordinance and keep Jacksonville virtually the only major U.S. city where it’s still legal to fire employees because of their sexual orientation. Some council members who voted no—including Kimberly Daniels, who has said that she is grateful for slavery because otherwise she would still be in Africa worshipping trees—came to the Sunday service to stand up and be applauded for voting against a bill that FBC Pastor Mac Brunson said would “accommodate sexual orientation and sexual expression in the city.” The word “accommodate” is not just a metaphor: the same Jacksonville motel that turned away a black family in 1954 can legally refuse a night’s rest in 2015 to a gay couple, legally married in Florida, with children.

To put it in starker terms, the motel can legally turn them away just because they’re faggots—an epithet I was called with impunity inside and outside of Duval County Public Schools. One teacher I adored, who taught me to think critically in a course called Theory of Knowledge, told another student it was a “waste” that I wasn’t straight—a gay relative of hers had died alone of “cancer” on “the streets of San Francisco.” My American history teacher, an unmarried woman who emphasized past contributions of women, told me after class, “Homosexuality is unnatural.” When it was falsely rumored I would come out of the closet and champion LGBT rights in my graduation speech, the principal summarily requested a copy of it to ensure that wasn’t the case. After I returned as a first-year teacher to the school, a former teacher of mine—the boys’ wrestling coach—slapped me in the face beside my faculty mailbox in the front office. Five years earlier he had required one of my closest friends to get parental permission in order to research the beginnings of the modern gay rights movement at Stonewall. Even by those who loved me—some of whom prayed around the flagpole every morning—what was presumed but only once stated: I was going to hell.

In such an environment in 1997, when sodomy was still illegal in Florida, I came out to my parents as we sat on my sea-foam green bedspread. My father held his head in his hands. My mother stood up. “No one will want

to be around you,” I was told. “No one goes to a gay doctor or lawyer.” At the time, indeed, we knew of no gay physicians or attorneys. A presumably straight, presumably licensed physician, though, a friend of my father’s, believed hormonal deficiencies caused homosexuality, despite the lack of scientific evidence. And so one morning, in a clinic whose waiting room held a complete woolly mammoth skeleton, I was told I needed a booster shot, but the nurse actually drew blood to check my testosterone. I felt violated—violated—to my core. In northeast Florida, thirty miles from the Georgia border, where were the suitable role models for being a self-accepting, humble gay man with dignity and vision?

Both shark and boy have the same eyes—those of my father—and the same pair of whiskers dangling off their faces.

In high school, it was a disabled Jewish lesbian poet with Southern roots who taught me about vision. A quietly courageous English teacher, rumored to be a “femi-Nazi,” assigned my class a coded, self-protective early poem of Adrienne Rich’s, ironically titled “Living in Sin.” But had my teacher assigned us any of the visionary poems from *The Dream of the Common Language* unapologetically portraying lesbian existence, she would have risked public ridicule and termination. When a well-respected instructor at Jacksonville’s Forrest High School—its namesake a former ККК Grand Wizard and Confederate lieutenant—assigned Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* to his AP seniors in 2000, only one parent, the Reverend Gene Cross of Wesconnett Baptist Church, complained. He told my local paper, “I built picket fences and church walls to protect my daughter from homosexuality in this raw and filthy manner.” Even today, for most of Jacksonville, this is bravely articulated common sense, not a bigot’s toxic venom.

Far away from the reverend’s bulwarks, I can still remember sitting at the end of my driveway, beside a swath of ferns and pines, hot tears running down my face. Why was I in love with yet another boy who couldn’t love me back? Did I love men because of irregularities in my biochemistry? Because I had been abused? Sitting in a beach chair, I held *The Dream of the Common Language*, a gift that a sympathetic friend had given me the day before. Turning to the first poem, I read aloud Rich’s words about Marie Curie: “She died a famous woman denying / her wounds / denying / her wounds came from the same source as her power.” Your wounds, Rich told me that afternoon, are beautiful. They are valuable. Speak from your wounds to tap into the power that vision—artistic, political, cosmic—offers.

But it was the final poem in the book, “Transcendental Etude,” that seemed most movingly to define vision: seeing beyond our conditioned ideas in order to perceive our truths. And to reimagine our lives. As a teenager, the word “transcendental” appealed to me because it suggested the shedding of a useless self, a declaration of spiritual and ethical independence, what she calls “pull[ing] back from the incantations, / rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly” and “the cutting-away of an old force that held her / rooted to an old ground.” Marrying a woman was not inevitable. I could, without shame, be with a man “eye to eye / measuring each other’s spirit, each other’s / limitless desire.” I could pray to Ganesha, the Buddha, Jesus, even trees—or nothing at all. I could become a teacher and poet, instead of an investment banker or orthopedic surgeon living on a golf course in some gated community. I could stand up to my abusers. In the most ordinary of situations—writing poems, walking through the grocery store, standing in the voting booth—I could think and feel for myself. And perhaps the hollowness I felt would dissipate. Though Rich wrote it for women in the 1970s, the poem felt as though it were written for me, a physically awkward, gregarious boy who loved seashells, the U.S.S. Enterprise, and Mariah Carey. I had often pointed my telescope eastward toward a fuzzy splotch in Orion that appears in Rich’s poem:

We cut the wires, find ourselves in free-fall, as if
our true home were the undimensional
solitudes, the rift
in the Great Nebula.

“Vision begins to happen in such a life,” she writes in the climactic final stanza. But what kind of life? What kind of life could poetry help me imagine beyond Jacksonville? One, she suggests, committed to the transcendental etude. The often maddening, boring study that is the examined life, even though “[n]o one ever told us we had to study our lives.” The quietly passionate quest to define identity and meaning and spirit on one’s own hard-won terms, based on direct experience.

To demonstrate what this self-examination brings us, Rich goes on to imagine a woman who “quietly walked away / from the argument and jargon in a room” in order to create a collage consisting of natural, elemental bits and pieces: cat whisker, seaweed, fabric, wasp nest, feather. This creation comes not out of ambition to win a Guggenheim, score a tenure-track job, or be eternalized in the canon. But rather, after inner and outer witness, from a deep and deepening abiding in the artistic

process. From the invisible force that leads Cole's "hand moving apart / from the body": a faith in that magic. From bare attention to the present moment, "the musing of a mind / one with her body." And from a yearning to see one's past and future in their totality. Vision and creation become inseparable.

Art might not be only a vehicle for human understanding. It could also be part of a larger spiritual effort to cultivate freedom from hatred and greed. The kind of liberation worked out over lifetimes, that no activism or relationship or pill can alone provide. As she says in a later collection so beautifully: "Freedom . . . // daily, prose-bound, routine / remembering. Putting together, inch by inch / the starry worlds. From all the lost collections." In "Transcendental Etude," this is a dragonfly-like vision that enables a woman to see herself as subversive, prismatic agitator ("the sherd of broken glass slicing light in the corner"); comforter and healer ("the plentiful, soft leaf / that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes the wound"); as well as bedrock and source ("the stone foundation, rockshelf further / forming underneath everything that grows"). My pretense, the poem told me, could fall away— I could speak for myself, and my words could possibly do for others what hers had done for me. When I was a freshman in college, I wrote her a gushing letter that ended with this sentence: "I just wanted to share my thoughts with you, the one who has shaped me so." The latter phrase is hyperbolic, almost creepy to me now. Adrienne Rich didn't mold me from the dust of the earth. Her words, though, gave me new eyes.

An episodic vision is like a vivid dream that makes you see the waking world differently, demands to be recorded, blurted out to a lover, a confessor, the world. The images take hold of you. They release you. They take hold. They have nothing and everything to do with you. It is said that technology uses us to perpetuate itself, to evolve. The Muse—or the imagination or the goddess or the collective unconscious—uses us to be given form. It uses our cortex and hands, our whole being, to be born. And a new way of seeing—a unique artistic vision—develops.

I look back: the beacon now is glowing a deep amber-brown, my father's eye color, my brother's, then a light blue, my mother's, and spins, faster and faster—