

from EFFACEMENT

Elizabeth Arnold

XL.

I reached a point, a pivot
thinking I'd turned

outward
once and for all, away

—it's looking out that's living—
then saw Muir's report:

“There is one perturbing
experience that's inevitable. It's

this. He (the nurse) finds he must
fraternize with his fellow-men

at whom he cannot look
without the grievous task

of betraying by his expression
how awful is their appearance.

I confess that this discovery
came as a surprise.

I had not known before
how usual and necessary

a thing it is to gaze
straight at anybody

to whom one is speaking,
and to gaze with

no embarrassment
when some unguarded glance of yours

may cause him hurt.”

XXIII. Case 517

5.3.18. *Operation.*—Rhinoplasty, subtotal Indian
method.

16.4.18. *Operation.*—Right costal cartilage im-
plantation. Two large pieces put in for nose and
eye. Skin-grafts over the undisturbed granulations.
A piece of whole-thickness skin the size of a florin
put in.

Result.—Satisfactory.

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8.6.18. *Operation.*—A piece of cartilage taken from subcutaneous store, shaped in form of rod and inserted from the root of the nose.

Result.—Satisfactory.

27.6.18. *Operation.*—Further implantation to give form to the tip. A third main piece inserted between the skin and the previous cartilage rod, which gave a very fine-edged bridge effect. An eyelid plastic performed at the same sitting.

Result.—No trouble occurred.

But on the eighth day an abscess formed, the last bridge cartilage evacuated. On the eighth day the nose suppurated and had to be reopened. Pus and the last bridge cartilage were evacuated. On the eighth day, the nose was obliterated from within.

18.10.18. *Operation.*—Transfer of piece of cartilage from No. 681 for future use.

18.12.18. *Operation.*—The above piece of cartilage inserted in tip and bridge.

Result—healed.

XVI.

What subtle brain's meanderings are
cut, crimped

—death of a thought, a
way of thinking

definite in its pattern as a profile.

XLI.

You can see more as a soul,
darkness speeding into darkness.

Earth's harder.

Like a spacecraft on reentry,
the body has to

burn its way through the sky's lens.

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XLII. Phenomenology of Perception

Merleau Ponty says the body is
“the manner in which an I

comes to know and express itself.

My experience breaks forth into things,
things that are not my things.

World, world, definition of my body
—how I come to know and express myself.”

.

“The soule is delighted with variety.
It is dulled with identity.”

.

Which to trust,
a categorizing, disbelieving spirit

such as Aristotle’s,

or that which
purposing or not

glows
into what’s before it,

goes

spreading

flows?

XXXVIII.

*Questo muro. Wall of light, of fire.
To believe it won’t hurt walking a heavy body*

through that out of Purgatory!

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XLIII.

Four in the morning, working to stop
the voices talking

in my head, with the marred heart
racing, skipping beats,

I take deep breaths and

I'm in the darkened ophthalmologist's examination room,
the phoropter lens drops, clicks inside its casing,

and the whole world shifts,

then another, thicker lens, then

nothing

—heart of the mind, heart in a body,
body in a house in the troposphere

where all our weather is,
three men—alive!—

in the half-shattered *Odyssey*,
Apollo 13, third mission to the moon they had to

sling their ship around instead of landing.

Huddling in the too-small, frayed tin foil hull of the LEM they'd moved to,
they forced the rough-shod, manual burns to steer

computerless at apogee

aiming themselves themselves
at the bowling-ball-hard black-blue planet

and the sea Odysseus was whirled around in
by the gods.

My father stood

on the heaving deck of the submarine chaser,
a Coast Guard cutter

but not full-length, scant ordnance,
and the other larger ship they'd tried to guard

hit, sunk
before the destroyer radioed made it to the scene,

the depth charges having
fallen onto nothing.

Helpless as Odysseus minus the gods,
my father and the others watched

the sea fill up with men,
room only for a few in their boat.

Helpless as Odysseus *with* the gods,
Tiresias lapping up the blood.

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The destroyer came in time to save my father,
or maybe the U-boat just

swam away in the murk . . .

And a year before he died in the loony bin, the woman
sitting across the room screamed

“Help!”

for the hundred and twenty-seventh time that morning.

XLIV.

In a freezer when I read it he was
probably gray.

My sister saw his body turn gray
as he died, then suddenly

grayer.

Now what color is it?

Not so deep in the ground as I'd thought,
the concrete, swimming-pool-like vault

halting for a little while the give of earth.
I want to be against earth

bodily, I said.

As against you in our bed, Jack.

XLVI. After the Storm

By the path to the salmon run,
the stream out of hearing up the trail in a park outside Olympia,

a flock of winter wrens
hopped and fluttered in the undergrowth.

It was as if they'd just arrived
out of the nest together,

a couple of dozen emerging
as if cellularly

—more like cubs than birds,
liquidy clumps.

But the salmon held firm in their bodies,
black and white like cows

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but missile-shaped, a little bit of silver.
Some swam in groups, others alone.

They struggled in loud water just to keep from going backwards
after the storm. Worn out, solitary

whether alone or not, they inched upstream,
bent the beautiful body—

eyeing the future, they
fell back, wavered forward, nosed

at the big dark underwater parts of rocks, cozying up to them
their only friends.

XLVII.

Heyerdahl's men saw they were
of it, of the

sky, sea,

the balsa logs their raft was made of
growing seaweed as it floated

quietly over the Pacific,

a reef of fish in the shaded world
under it, the guitar above, books, art.

“Bonitos swam onboard with the waves.”

NOTES

In poem XL (“I reached a point, a pivot . . .”), I quote Ward Muir, a journalist who wrote about Sidcup Hospital, the center for reconstructive surgery on British soldiers wounded in the face during the WWI. “Case 517” uses words and sentences from Harold Gillies’ seminal 1920 study, *Plastic Surgery of the Face*. Gillies was the head surgeon at Sidcup. In poem XXXVIII, I use Charles Singleton’s translation of Dante’s *Purgatorio*. Poem XLVII refers to *Kon-Tiki*, in which Thor Heyerdahl chronicles his 1947 journey in a large, unmotorized raft of pre-Columbian design 3,770 nautical miles across the Pacific from Peru to Raroia, a Polynesian island. Heyerdahl made the trip to prove a theory about prehistoric emigration patterns in that part of the world.

Elizabeth Arnold’s third collection, a book-length sequence entitled *Effacement*, will be published by Flood Editions in 2010. Other poems from *Effacement* have appeared or are forthcoming in *Paris Review* and *Poetry*. Arnold is on the MFA faculty at the University of Maryland. She lives outside Washington, D.C.