

# DARK ADAPTATION: MILAN, 1510-11

**David Hawkins**

—after Leonardo DaVinci's *Foetus in Utero*, 1514

In this light you cannot see his face.

He's been fixed, light entering from behind & above  
 So we see the sack split, its cross section rendered in layers,  
 The child curled in his shell, head tucked between his knees—  
 This pose repeated from different angles. Uneven blocks of notes,  
 Cribbed in the mirror-fashion, run to the rough  
 Edge of the page, cracked & eaten, discordant here & there  
 Against the smooth frame of the uterine envelope.  
 Separately, each item (marked by differences in quality  
 & complexity) adds to a sense of confusion, like bedroom furniture  
 Taken out & installed in a field; together though  
 They call up a whole, which is diagrammatic, unified,  
 Iconic, the mind of the master at work. According to Vasari,  
 "He gave himself to the study of human anatomy, ...which  
 To that time had been lost in shades of ignorance. Lionardo...  
 Made a book with drawings in red chalk, outlined with pen,  
 Of the bones & muscles he had dissected  
 With his own hand..." among them this child, stillborn,  
 In its seventh or eighth month. Afterwards (1510?  
 A year later?) it was obscured again, draped  
 In shadow & de-countenanced for all but Leonardo  
 Who may have carried the image with him longer. Like a note  
 Pressed between the pages of a book, an odd peopling  
 Of the once quiet destinations "now purring contentedly  
 Beneath the touch," & the wide plazas of diversion  
 Were again crowded with children sucking ices, minds aswim  
 With idle thought, as about when the ambivalent ones  
 Finally inherit the earth. In at least this one way  
 The figure & these forces that delivered it months before  
 My first son was born now seem to me so enormous  
 They're undetectable from a ground floor view—continental  
 But adrift, pushed along some unknown route  
 Until I sought the image out, looking for assurances.  
 But even from some distance the child is hard to see,  
 Cast from different perspectives, giving the study dimension,  
 Yet crusted with shadow, the black, half-slick scab  
 Of some unnamed substance growing over the prow.  
 Its message was meant for us, but delivered  
 So long ago many of the details are gone;  
 & the memory of the image flickers, like light from stars  
 One suspects are already dead—stiff as buckram—  
 A residue of faint sparks after the source has gone dark.  
 Nothing vanished here can return & must be passed  
 Hand to hand, its substance absorbed physically to remain warm,  
 Current, its name a familiar shape on the lips—& this, in fact,  
 Is how Verrochio schooled him in the secret, the bones & muscles  
 To become so important among his Renaissance contemporaries.  
 The appreciation, on the other hand, was entirely his own.  
 Leonardo, Goethe imagines, "began to be aware  
 That behind the outside of objects he succeeded so well in copying,  
 There still lay concealed many a secret,...which would be  
 Worth his efforts to attain." This impulse is modern & inspired  
 Through him numerous innovations, principal of which  
 Are the anatomies. But we've entered the story late,  
 The mantle already pierced, the occluding viscera plucked out,  
 Catalogued, stored beyond our gaze, which stops at the page,  
 This sublativ "process" occurring while new items arrive  
 In a parallel & countervailing stream. Only the child

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Appears untouched. In a dark, stone-hewn basement lab  
Of Filarete's *Ospedale Maggiore* ("In the company of corpses,"  
He wrote, "quartered & flayed & horrible to see") he stooped  
To the little body to capture its secret proportions; the twist  
Of heavy lines circling the lambent bulb of its skull is  
The artifact of the moment, a *pentimento* that makes it  
(No one knows if Leonardo intended this) appear to tremble.  
Yet as he reached each new nadir the answer it once promised  
Vanished, & each time the particular of what once seemed the wide  
Threshold of a new way of seeing became only part  
Of a predictable smaller version, written in *parvo*,  
On the faint, whiskered expressions of the animals  
Watching us from a safe distance. Even the series  
Of smaller images branching out below the central figure  
Like an island chain implies a search for a secret the child  
Appears reluctant to disclose; & though we rightly recognize  
The odds pitched overwhelmingly against us, the industry  
Of the representation (each tiny pad of the foot,  
The puckered stalk of the ear, the crown radiating  
This supernal, almost-human glow) is so fine it captivates us  
& we cannot turn away. "*THERE!* From behind yonder rocks  
Huddled precipitously against the shore..."—it's as if we've heard it too:  
The first furtive strains once issued out to him ramping up again,  
But timidly this time, like the whistle of a little tin-fife, drawing  
Us headlong into certain danger, never to know what lies  
*Behind the outside of these objects*, as the illusion  
Of depth brings us bursting against the surface.

Leonardo sketched the boy in his regular fashion:  
Rapidly, with lines crossing richly in the lower shadows  
& that famous subtlety of gesture.  
But it's the *quattrocento* motif, its *topos*  
That we're meant to notice first—fleshed, fixed, transmitted  
In modes inimical to doctrine, scaled & contorted  
Along some invisible vein. Sometime later this intrication  
Will be replaced by Mannerist compression,  
The tortuously posed & sumptuous portraits  
Of the late Renaissance. For the moment in time  
That the sketch represents though, the viewer has ample cause  
To linger over the curve of this shoulder & back  
Hunched roughly, the drooping head, arms folded loosely,  
Hands cupped over the knees, obscuring the expression  
As if in that instant the artist (rather than the model) felt reticence  
Or withdrawal, or impermanence. But it's unclear, the meaning  
Distorted by the seeming naturalness of the arrangement,  
So for a moment we might be fooled into thinking  
We've interrupted his sleep—when really it's prolonged,  
Channeled into a circuit that buffers but never touches us.  
Even now, a handful of events, perilous or sirenic, goes lapping  
Over it in the darkwater memory. But it's wrong somehow,  
The color off, the shell—even before we know he botched it—  
Too hematic, cartoonish, veinal, like the glossy covers  
Of fitness magazines in the grocery: the bronze-oiled body only  
The outermost surface of an overmuscle heart; & at last we can't  
Bear it—not the fantasy, which is palpable, truculent, oozing  
With pathos, but its failure, which is all *too*-human &  
Apes our own. At seven months, between three & four pounds,  
My own child was remarkably still, conscious since the eighth week  
But curled quietly in the liquid warmth of his mother's womb.  
The nurse assured us: his eyes (globular, roe-full  
With salt, near fully developed by the twelfth week)  
Had begun to flutter, taking in their first images  
In the limpid dark—& I imagined this might be disquieting  
If we could see it. Of course, these dim scenes are no more than priming,  
Gessoed thickly, but imperceptibly beneath the still-  
To-come waking life—which is why they would have been  
Intolerable for the master, whose *Foetus* illustrates  
The vertigo-inducing depths to which he'd go  
In pursuit of a feverish curiosity. Over two-and-a-half decades  
He performed anatomies of some thirty bodies  
(This is Leonardo's own liberal estimate) & many animal  
Dissections as well; but instead of the incongruous designs

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Of artists after Vesalius (the horizon of flowers, the delicate ribbons  
Of flesh & pose so *recherché*, so romantic in composition  
That they betray Von Calcar's hand) his anatomies are generally  
Unvarnished, these myological studies demonstrating  
Remarkable detachment. In large part, we have Leonardo  
To thank for our modern dispossession, born of a marriage  
Of text & reverie—though this pulls up short too,  
& meaning is suspended once more, en route.  
How long have we waited, we wonder, & the grand tableau,  
Shut up amid shelves of ratty boxes & ancient travel trunks &  
Suitcases secured with shoestring? But already I'm growing  
Impatient &—shuttled to the surface, ejected from the dream  
Of depth, the anatomist's metaphor—I see it's too volatile  
A space for us to seriously consider inhabiting, hieratic  
But cramped, & tinged with death like a cloister  
Whose alcoves & recesses end too early & only go skin deep.

This sheet represents three or more years toward the end,  
From 1510 or 11 to 1514, filled unsurprisingly  
With Leonardo's dilatory notes: a few on physics (the geometric  
Design in the lower right quadrant is an illustration  
Of a head-first delivery) & a reminder for a book on hydraulics  
For a friend, the anatomist Marc Antonio; & still  
He might have added more were it not for political upheaval  
& his subsequent retreat to the court at Amboise, where he died  
Less than ten years later. *Has anything ever been done?*  
He asks repeatedly in the notebooks,  
& more importantly we wonder, is genuine contact  
Possible without it, that is, without the possibility  
Of being seen as we truly are once  
The sheath is peeled away? Admittedly, my closeness  
To the subject makes it hard to stay objective.  
Subjacency clouds the picture, the world crowded  
In so tight the particulars seem to overlap,  
Creating a confusing collage. Even the unoccupied districts,  
Which spring up occasionally between these others,  
Are vital if less noticed, fertile for the growing up of things  
Whose time has not yet come—& the framework,  
Perpetually taxed, leans out against the weary boundaries  
On the brink of collapse. But it is the anonymity (heightened  
By the penumbral veil that hides the face) that is most  
Affecting for us who—not surprisingly—see ourselves  
In the sequestered figure of the child. To be sure, we find  
A particular imprecision appealing, a special ambiguity  
Which can drive one to abstraction (as it has here).  
But this tiny stowaway—half-visible & impastoed  
With such artless ferocity that it makes me wince—  
Is *too much*, & I feel its aching even as I sense  
I would be naked without it, not even certain  
There might be anything to be uncertain about.  
What precedes Leonardo's embryology is principally  
Comic & conjectural, the pornographic doodlings  
Of teenage virgins desperate for a touch.  
Except for subject matter, Leonardo inherits almost nothing  
From those early scribblers, inventing his technique  
From whole cloth. But more remarkable than its science  
Or powers of observation or even the unmatched eye  
For perspective, is the way this sheet summons its viewer,  
Pulling each into the open spaces. The significance  
Of this painterly ploy is so epoch-changing, I'm amazed  
No one stumbled over it before—like a map  
In the Mover's own enormous hand. All the same, we shouldn't  
Judge his forebearers too harshly: we see as little as they do  
(Though it doesn't mean much to them), our novel awareness  
Visible from a different & seemingly less interesting angle.  
That's not to say this can't be found  
In the crude, anticipatory medieval rendering,  
But it feels less itself there—so overaware  
Of the embarrassing malappropriations of local color & dialect,  
It at last goes home alone, ignored  
Or roughly dispatched. In the little window  
Of the sketch, flush with warm light,

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It's this scene I've wandered in on. In his celebrated essay,  
Pater called this "the art of going deep, of tracking the sources  
Of expression to their subtlest retreats..." But what is here avers  
All it cannot assimilate, as if a hidden network  
Had been hinted at, a track backmasked in the wax,  
Inaudible beneath the strings & brass so we never know  
It's there except for the inexplicable feeling of diminishment.  
Or like ice, transparent, but on closer inspection, creased  
By millions of hair-fine fissures which arrest the light—  
& amplify it! Perhaps this is what Leonardo had in mind  
When after Avicenna's *Glacialis* he sketched the eye,  
A series of self-contained spheres—the *spera crystallina*  
Like a glass cage at the center in which subtler emanations,  
Issuing out along the multitudinous lines of the *diaphana*  
Are captured & become "divided into as many parts  
As there are eyes of animals seeing it..." Isn't it strange then,  
The face of the child here remains hidden, so one senses in this  
Vaguely the act of contrition, the strange self-  
Obliterating clarity of it, a secret woven so deeply  
In the psychic fabric, one might never think to admit it  
To himself, & the feeling this is a perspective only  
Rarely permitted & one perhaps never meant for us?

But what then? Surely, those of us who've seen the child & can't  
Shake the infectious image now recognize the abortive line  
Of thought, useless in the way all good ideas are  
Beneath our little soap-cake of sky; & though carrying on  
In this way feels vaguely self-indulgent, I can't help thinking  
This is part of what it means to be human. It takes the circuitous  
Path of a dream, a music of plainness & depth you're only half-  
Aware of now issuing from an adjacent room of thought,  
& it dawns on me—if I'm ever to scuttle the hold  
It has over me, the way it seems to both pinpoint  
& fix my place on the floor-plan with its day-glow bright  
*YOU-ARE-HERE* semaphore, then I may have no choice  
But to take my cue from whatever clues are left behind.  
After his master's death these pages became property  
Of the student, Melzi, who from theft, dissipation & negligence  
Nearly lost them. In 1760 Hunter recovered the studies  
From a locked chest in Kensington Castle, marveling  
At the artist's precise touch, the advanced use of perspective—  
& the implacable, curatorial hand of time or chance  
Which had preserved & tended them, allowing them  
To grow. How it all must have appeared to him, like the Secret  
Gardens at Tivoli, flowering with tiny sedge-colored rosettes  
From Leonardo's pen & wash—which I can't explain  
Unless one has spent a long time alone keeping at bay  
The obtruding voices, John Evelyn's *Diary* & the charming  
Passage on Villa d'Este notwithstanding. But even if I could  
Parse it, might it still feel unnatural, like the child  
That is never finished & remains an elegant expression  
Of truncated potential, a radical re-investment of artistic space  
Over which a shell now fits? It's impossible  
To view the child without at least a small twinge—  
Which interrupts the study mid-stroke—transforming it  
Into something its author may not have intended.  
Leonardo emptied the space only to have it all flood back in  
Behind him; & of course, this is natural, (in fact) central & gives way  
To inner districts seen obliquely but brilliantly—but also, it must  
Have frustrated the man, who in the fantastic tests & passionate  
Forkings of his life sought an unimpeded view. Even now the eyes  
See only what they will, exert an influence & capture  
A portion of us commingled with the scene of our arrival.  
Or, as Goethe said elsewhere: "If the eye had not the sun in it, it  
Could not see the sun." These phantoms,  
Injected into the image, alter it meaningfully but  
Inconspicuously. Like a blind spot that becomes  
Invisible once the mind has touched it, closing over the gaps  
Or patching them over, the process distorts  
The visible field. Eventually it all gets filled, but with every  
Manner of sundry projection we unwittingly cast on it—  
& the future, which has only begun to appear over

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The uneven surface, finishes what we could not: a strategy  
For civilizing the Turks or astral navigation or some other such  
Marvel of modern living. In this way the initial impulse  
Is entirely subsumed over time, the periodic renovations  
Ultimately eclipsing the master's first design.  
Such is the case for Filarete's hospital,  
The cherubic tableau & Gothic arches  
An afterthought really, but only in the way all history is.  
What must it have been like in 1510, the structure much  
Smaller, simpler, the air about it filled  
With a fumitory of rosemary cinders, the scent of  
Camphor & linens packed with rue? It's no small matter  
That we see what we think we see, as perhaps we have here, persuaded  
By a divergent note traveling through us, lost or absorbed  
In the permanent fibers, an impression diminishing  
In soft focus so as never to seem entirely absent; but also,  
This is the whole of it, staged on the dais of one's attention,  
A raised & contiguous surface not to be ignored or surpassed;  
& though we suspect the deficiency is with us,  
That it is truly the visible peak of a deeper meaning  
We won't see—or imagine brightly but falsely—  
There is no going back. The spokes & spandrels that once  
Strung the brightline, or the shell of the evening air &  
The ghostly impression the body stamps in it now dissolve  
In waves that ride out spastically toward a vanishing point.  
They spirit away with them the single image we carry  
Of the "self" that crowns the flesh, which we now see  
Was never the point, but merely distracted us  
From the vital subject. Life remains provincial, rich but reserved,  
Fitting its pocket exactly. The force the image has over us springs  
Not from any accuracy of vision, penetrating with the edge  
Of the artist's eye, but from the way (more difficult to explain)  
It accommodates the viewer, as if it knew & regarded warmly  
& at least for some time had been expecting us; & although  
This can't explain the distance between me & you, it casts  
A faint, framing glow on the wee hours, in neighborhoods  
Snuffed with carlight, when what we gathered, gained  
Against the dark, insensible curfews never filled the killing jar.

Results are rarely as dramatic as they are here (the child  
Curled in the uterine sack of a cow), our separate realities more  
Like the disarticulated man on successive transparent sheets.  
The intensity of feeling we experience before the image, too,  
Is fleeting, its place on the fluid tack of hours brief, soon passed  
Into other spectrums. But the image persists, its *vorstellung*  
Durable, independent of any investment we've felt into it & it lives  
With us, adopts us as its own until the particulars  
(Which may include its various errors) have dissolved & what  
Remains is the commodious living-space of a mutual care.  
Afterwards, it's our own & those who remember them to us  
Who inspire our affection. I can't see Leonardo's child now  
Without thinking of my own son, who by his little wet flesh  
First guided me to its place. But in the following moment,  
The image reinserts itself in the sphere of my attention.  
Martin Clayton writes: "The use of red chalk  
Exclusively for the fetus (black chalk is used for the remainder  
Of the underdrawing), together with the impression of  
Compact potential so strongly reinforced by the swirling pen-work,  
Makes the sheet one of the most emotionally affective  
Of Leonardo's late period." The Florentine miniaturist style  
Is only hinted at here, qualities of layer & glaze,  
*Morbidezza* & shadowing, their preciousity & refinement  
Replaced with the potency of this new perspective.  
In the absence of painterly artifice, it is the various distortions  
Which make the relationship between the image & child  
It was meant to represent so difficult. But just as they are  
In the *écorché* (the Anatomical Ms. A, the old one,  
& Horse of Sforza), these errors lie hidden  
(Even for the informed viewer) & exist as a separate text—  
Or require another text to unveil—thrusting us back over  
The threshold & into the depths of it. In time,  
We're each called back—& this is good, the living-

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In-it big enough, & when kept waiting it prods us,  
But gently. There's simply so much to keep us here  
Occupied, & really what else have you to do but perform  
The various small tasks of living, odious or plain,  
Unchoreographed errands & trips to the countryside for family  
Visits & meals of boiled meat? It even has the feel  
Of new arrival, though it's we who keep moving  
Into an unexpected present, to encounter anew the child  
Who has been here forever; & as we move out from this point  
To other latitudes, we too participate in it, returning as if  
After orbit, our descent sped by treasures that now weight our pockets  
& that Leonardo never could have predicted, but the sketch  
Always anticipated, in fact generously prepared for, moving  
In a predictable fashion over the landing zone to clear a space for us.

To be certain, the world is complicated by what we know,  
& as its image leaves the eye, depositing its calx-like residue,  
A vague, ashy substance, a dram of which is all that's needed  
To coat the dream-surface, it at last explodes outward.  
First the several smaller cartoons of the child,  
The cotyledon & womb where the attention travels & then  
Further out, stimulating distant expressions  
So the eyes are implicated in a generative chain:  
The retinal wall, then the less certain zones  
Of cortex & neural net, & at last over the arterial plateau  
Humming with cars, heading out to suburban posts  
Where some open the daily mail, snack from the impossible  
Fridge & fall to sleep, pressed against the warm flesh of another.  
Slipping back into the dream of it, I feel acutely its emptiness:  
Not the child, which now has a weight & density greater than my own,  
But the life-frame that borders on us & on which the sketch  
Has worked like a current that wears away secretly  
The shelf of the world. What this had to do with me  
Was not yet clear, though I felt it peripherally;  
The daily schedules, selecting us as if by default,  
Enabling a new mobility, no longer "plugged in,"  
Independent now, though altogether uncertain what  
To do with the new freedom, & at a loss to say even  
What it might mean. Certainly, Leonardo knew this, or sensed it  
Vaguely in the clay-ruddy figure of the child he labored  
So long to bring to light. There's no depth here; it too  
Has been excised, leaving in its wake an aura that  
Suffuses the environs, like the prodding of a phantom limb.  
Only his desires go deep, & even that  
Is self-generated, intimate but provisional,  
& as it branches out toward the shore of some body, beautiful  
But diffuse, pebbled intermittently, at some remove  
From the action, we sense the strand sloping out beneath us  
To meet an invisible but crucial floor below the dark,  
Watery surface. Leonardo, I can only guess  
At the hazards you faced in your task, my only hint  
The places you stopped, withdrawing from the plenum just  
Beyond your reach. The image that remains resists  
Even our subtle & sophisticated diletantism, proffering alternately—  
& for the first time—the unfinished figure of a child *in utero*.  
But its message is too piercing, its meaning, by dint of reflection,  
Cast back on us, who feel incomplete, partial, sensing viscerally  
Yet inexplicably, the sublime inducement brought about  
By the child, a subtle inversion no one has planned for, yet each  
Participates in, softly aware of that participation.

This is not art exactly but another manner of representation,  
Elements of design, composition, & perspective employed  
Precisely to promote & support, calming the waters  
So a single reflection may rise on the capturing lens.  
The child is no more self-possessed than we, lacks even the  
Awareness of itself to comport its image artfully,  
Etched on the visible screen. The gesture is so innocent  
We might confuse it for life were it not for its reticence,  
Which makes it less certain. We pick up, walk mindlessly away  
Through the haze, light falling habitually over this side  
So something else grows over the anterior half of the dream.

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For a moment we might feel its proximity, a benign presence  
Many mistake as paternal, authorial, though it refuses  
Any relation with us, colossal but confused by diverse forms.  
Of course, the distinction is fine, felt, calls into question  
The distinguishing properties vis-à-vis art after all,  
But it does so on the impenetrable surface of the image.  
What we do in this half-realized state of existence  
Is deeply meaningful only to us, who are creatures of  
Such hiding it shouldn't surprise us little is revealed. Perhaps  
Once or twice, & then only midst some passionate canoodling  
Have we ever wished to occupy another. But it passes quickly,  
Too much to put the mind to, torqued with its own wheeling,  
& we move on & are accommodated, leaving  
Behind an unfinished trail which adds substantially  
To the prevailing mystery. Maybe as Braque said,  
The only thing worth a damn in art is what cannot be  
Explained. That goes double for "not-art," which must  
Include this running surface, its paint still wet.  
You wear the cobbler's vest & I the tinkerer's crown,  
& all the way into Soggy Acres & the Wump Oaks subdivision  
The spirit of hotdog stands & burger joints attends you.  
But into this era of good vibrations a new presence has emerged,  
& because the scene seemed to you complete, fully-realized,  
Incapable of supplement, you stop to take it in. The addition is small,  
Almost unnoticed, & even before its meaning  
Can be deduced, sets the whole system trembling, spinning  
In a slightly new orbit. The principals never touch—& if they did  
What would keep the universe from folding up its tent?—  
But the potential is there, warming the peripheries, producing  
Such energy, though severality ultimately keeps them apart,  
The edges are singed. In part, this tragic almost-ness is the source  
Of the novelty, the brand-newness of the image, strange & dewy,  
Barely uncurled from the stem—but it's also a darker font,  
Sending out black shoots to crawl along the surface. We don't know  
What took this child; Leonardo never speaks of it.  
He stops (or *is* stopped) at the surface & the little flesh  
Remains intact & opaque. This is not  
His anatomy after all, but hers,  
Though she too remains opaque: present but  
Dark, enlivening the sketch like a current passing  
Through the hidden circuitry of it; & even if we ignore death,  
As indeed we are encouraged to do, provoked  
By "the use of red chalk *exclusively* for the fetus,"  
The material effect is the same: the effect the artist means  
Properly to enact, excerpting finally himself so that  
The picture appears self-generated, independent, impending.

Can you see it now? No, it's still too dark, the sun slipping  
Behind black spars of cloud. The only difference is everything  
Else has been cast into shadow now, too. We're around somewhere  
& probably destined to haunt the apron of some event, but no one  
Knows exactly what it might be, or if we're properly attired,  
Or even have at our disposal the recommended greetings.  
Is it possible we agreed to this at some earlier point,  
Prompted by a small, incandescent, inner version of ourselves?  
There are numerous signs, staking the berm & illuminated  
Against the night, advertising our most private thoughts.  
But these crude expressions must be squeezed out  
& never posed a serious threat anyhow.  
In the face of such obstacles, can there be a more reasonable  
Answer than art, sacred to us for its re-orienting properties?  
After all, there will always be these sorrows: the angelic bedsprings,  
The variant odes & incidental orders, domestic shifts in climate  
Like wind sweeping from the parent hills the clouds. How one  
Feels about pet sweaters & Montesquieu, too, probably  
Says a lot about a person. What we need is levity, love, good food  
In abundance, an occasional view full of stars polished to a kiss,  
These susurrations weaving through the palmfrond as we sleep.  
But this obtrusion is different, adherent, intractable,  
& the dispersal of depth it ferments has brought on  
A permanent climate, a growing equilibrium  
Beneath the economizing shell of stars. A general despondency

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Is the new chic; & indeed, there is critical uncertainty  
Over the next step, not what it might be (as if  
It were forthcoming) but would it be possible?  
The prudent propose retreat, the marchlands pleasant  
This time of year, their day-long light of a quality unrivaled  
& good for growing; but there's this feeling  
That the environs areared with something else in mind,  
& as this feeling grew so too did the habitat until it became cavernous,  
Too big, meant for more than us. The nights, for example,  
Are rheumatic. *Well, so be it*, say the enlightened ones,  
But you knew they too hoped to outgrow it one day,  
Though that seemed less likely now than the chance  
We might finally disappear altogether. Nothing penetrates  
The ensconcing shell, which appears to us only erratically,  
& the child is undiminished, added to until the accretion  
Has mounted a visible isle to drift unmoored  
Against the horizon. Why it should persist while we shrivel  
Beneath the lintel of the modern age isn't clear to us,  
Hidden by the veil we have to seek it through.  
But those waves climbing furiously up the cliff face  
Only *seem* threatening, when in truth we are  
Regarded with utter indifference—or not at all. Or perhaps  
As with the photograph where the subject  
Has been abstracted by the angle & proximity of the artist's lens,  
We can't tell exactly *what* we're looking at; it could be  
The inside of a shoe or a rat trap or the immeasurable  
Emptiness threatening to spill out of each new moment  
As it surges up & over us; but we've traveled too close, & now  
Absorbed, the distance between us erased in one astonishing stroke,  
We're forced to view the unfolding scene from within,  
Unable to sort it out. In other words: We are it, & it  
Occurs to you now, maybe this is why the knife never cuts  
Deep enough & darkness adheres. The picture's theatrical, of course,  
But the ruse is so emphatic that the curtain must remain  
Only partly drawn, like *trompe l'oeil*, purposed to deceive us.  
You know this, know on some level no matter the depth  
Of our wanting we won't be admitted, & know too that there's no  
Escaping it: the urge to throw ourselves at the mortared surface  
Is irresistible, a sort of cosmic joke, though knowing  
In this case makes us no less vulnerable. It's maddening really,  
Stranded like the child with only the distant flickering  
To suggest the passing barge or shore; & these concerns  
Must be jettisoned now, too, or forcefully  
Stripped from you until only one thing & its reflection  
In the bareness of all else remains. Once you wanted to be  
Full with light—but *now*, to be unfettered, a little boat cut adrift  
Over the black surface of the lake: This is the new enterprise.  
The bigger picture, only hinted at in Leonardo's sketch,  
Continues to resist our feeble attempts to shape it.  
But I haven't forgotten that this began with a child,  
Even now when—though the anxieties remain—  
There may be no doubling-back short of abandoning the rules  
For a less fitting, more affected detachment.  
Who would accept such a conclusion, knowing as we do  
That some things are impossible & therefore worth doing?

The world's been gentle with you so far.  
There was that time in Brisbane, but then Brisbane  
Humbles everyone; & this intruder doesn't mean  
To menace you either, really. It doesn't even know  
We're here, pattering about like an old man in his undershirt,  
Dragging the furniture back  
Where it will be safe indoors, aware vaguely  
Of a presence it can't explain, but confused & a bit  
Drowsy now, too, dispensing with fancy inventions,  
Like fescue. At regular intervals the train-of-events  
Rumbles out & the rails slope down & out of view; the cars  
Empty, used up in the ways for which they were intended.  
This is the order of things as we know it, a schedule  
We may infer only from our position on the station platform;  
& the others who've passed this way before, leaving  
Their mark, like clumsy signs carved into concrete,

DARK  
ADAPTATION  
*David Hawkins*

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Are departing too, drifting through an open window  
You hadn't noticed before the cooler night air indicated it.  
That's to say, a true & deep understanding requires  
A meaningful acknowledgement  
Of all life's little errors left in—as you knew it must  
& would have to. This is why Leonardo shadowed the face  
(Not to create mystery but to acknowledge its persistence  
& make a space for it); & in a similar fashion we too  
May be allowed our reservations, which rather than  
Taking us from the cooperative, invite us in  
In a manner of speaking—a way around if not through.  
Up to this point there has been a certain continuity of feeling  
That this change—infinity small, barely audible  
From our far end of the era—signally disrupts,  
& we feel this like a switch that has been thrown,  
Re-apportioning the universe. It's the one we've been waiting for  
Though we'll be forgiven if at first we don't know it.  
In our current shriveled state, all outward indicators  
Seem constant, unaltered, that is to say, unfinished  
(*Has anything ever been done?*) & we, too, feel  
Fundamentally unchanged; yet we clearly see nothing  
Again can ever be the same. From this point on  
All movements will be tidal. Nothing  
Will surprise you much. You'll come to the gate, expecting  
To be turned away, but at peace, too, happy to be  
Diverted by a word or the orders of primrose flowering  
Beneath the latch; & though you may still hope this  
Will one day be explained—& it seems we should be able to—  
You have to let it go, to fade back or fall beneath  
The surface where it first formed, in the dark waters  
Of an insensible world. There now. That's not so bad, is it?  
The weather is a peculiar, never-to-be-repeated cool.  
The grass precisely the length it was in your dream  
& your wife exactly the woman you'd hoped to marry,  
Full of sexual cunning & compassion & the son  
You are soon & so eager to meet. This is what you wanted.  
I wanted it for you. The boy will grow, but you will always  
Think of him in this way, privately, & with much fondness;  
& perhaps one day soon you'll write me about it,  
A handful of lines, where outside & inside are  
Played on to some effect, as they are everywhere.  
As far as these things go, it doesn't seem like much, but there it is,  
The way endings always are (that is, about saying less).  
We'd come this way unexpectedly, by another route:  
I by something like mimicry, you thinking we'd seen this  
All before; & you're right—the location feels familiar,  
& that too is part of the miracle (is there a better word for it?).  
We didn't need Leonardo to illustrate the impasse of the image  
Yet here it is, ruddy as if with life, & the umbrellas are inspired.  
But don't rush. There's no hurry. There will be many more days  
Like this, after all, reading quietly to yourself,  
Someplace where the diners at nearby tables resemble  
Those at more distant tables, & so on, until the wide  
Fluttering network—of which you are the inventor & unremarkable  
Center—has reached the distant outposts, full & dark,  
& drifting off to sleep, the glasswall dream, the untouched  
Principle gathering interest for an eon.

## NOTES

## LINE 1

The immediate and graphical subject of the poem is Leonardo da Vinci's well known anatomical sketch (often titled *The Foetus in Utero* or *The Fetus and Linings of the Uterus*, though Leonardo did not himself explicitly title separate anatomical illustrations), in the Collection of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, at the Royal Library, Windsor Castle. Although Leonardo performed at least one other sketch of the same subject (*Five Views of a Foetus in Utero*, housed in the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Paris), I have chosen to focus here on the former and more widely recognized of the two.

## LINE 107

Generally recognized now is the fact that Leonardo confused animal and human anatomy in his *Foetus*. Dr. Ron Philo explains, "The information presented here is derived from animal dissection, personal observations of the process of pregnancy, and the actual dissection of a fetus. Remember that Leonardo may have had no real experience with human fetal membranes (i.e., the uterine lining); at the time of this drawing he depicted a cotyledonous placenta as in cattle, not a discoidal human one. The ovary is out of position and a mythical sperm duct is shown. Beautiful though the drawing is, its errors are great. It was, however, greatly advanced over his predecessors and contemporaries" (from *Leonardo da Vinci: The Anatomy of Man*, by Martin Clayton).

## LINE 126

In October of 1517, less than two years before the artist's death, the Cardinal of Aragon visited Leonardo at Clos Lucé near Amboise. The Cardinal's secretary, Antonio de Beatis, kept a record of that event, during which Leonardo avowed an extensive knowledge of human anatomy.

## LINE 148

According to Martin Clayton, "[t]he geometrical diagram at the center right [of the sketch, *The Foetus in Utero*], of an eccentrically weighted sphere rolling uphill, has convincingly been interpreted as a consideration of the rotation of the fetus in the womb for a head-first delivery" (*The Anatomy of Man* 125).

## LINE 238

Elmer Belt, M.D., in his Logan Clendening Lecture on the History and Philosophy of Medicine, *Leonardo the Anatomist*, reports that "Hunter's Atlas of the gravid uterus was in progress when he saw Leonardo's drawings [in 1760] and was published in 1774." According to Dr. Belt, "Hunter must have been especially impressed with [Leonardo's] drawing of the foetus *in utero*, for here, for the first time in the history of science, the correct foetal position is shown within the uterus and the separateness of the foetal circulatory components within the placenta from those of the maternal circulation is seen; the cotyledons of the foetal side are demonstrated as interdigitating with projections from the maternal portion of the placenta 'like the fingers of one hand placed between the digits of the other,' to paraphrase Leonardo's clarifying simile"(10). There is no indication here (or elsewhere that I've found) to indicate that Dr. Hunter recognized the errors in Leonardo's sketch.

Interestingly, the route by which the Leonardo folio arrived in the London collection has remained one of Art's great mysteries. *Guardian* art critic, Jonathan Jones, has offered one plausible and provocative scenario involving the court painter, Peter Paul Reubens—but vested parties have yet to reach consensus.

## LINE 449

As was his custom, Leonardo used both sides of the sheet on which *The Foetus in Utero* appears. The recto side, the more widely known and artistic, is the focus of the poem here. But the verso (often referred to as *Dissection of the Human Foetus*) also includes many of Leonardo's working notes, and illustrates a dissection of fetal membranes and organs. Though it is not clear that the subject of this verso side is the same as that in the recto (and at least some of the verso material—as it is embryonic, aborted in the early first trimester—is plainly of a source separate from the recto *Foetus*), the *Dissection* at least opens the possibility that Leonardo may have (albeit at a later date) performed an anatomy of the *Foetus* subject

David Hawkins' poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, including *Barrow Street*, *Bat City Review*, *Chelsea*, *DIAGRAM*, *Poems & Plays*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, and *Umbrella*, among others. His collection, *Dark Adaptations* was a finalist in the '09 Dorset Prize competition (Tupelo Press), was selected by Allen Grossman as the first runner-up in the 2008 Bellday Books poetry prize, and is the recipient of the '08 Utah Arts Council prize for a collection of poems. He teaches at the University of Utah, is the former Editor-in-Chief of *Quarterly West* ('01-'05), and lives in Salt Lake City with his wife and their two boys.