

THE RHETORIC OF BLOOD

He hated hearing last things. It was breath, the quantity of oxygen in the blood.

The rhetoric of the blood. It presents itself directly to the senses.

Norma Cole, *Coleman Hawkins*, *Ornette Coleman*

“The rhetoric of blood presents itself directly to the senses.” I jotted this proposition in a notebook as Norma read from an unpublished manuscript. I don’t know what was moving me. I left the sentence alone on the page without comment, undated & unlocated, as if everything about it were self-evident, as obvious as blood. But I don’t know what it means, I mean, how does rhetoric present direct sensation? Does music do that? Can poetry? The line astonishes me as it arouses the promise of false immediacy that it simultaneously dispels.

Norma’s lines work like a heuristic, and enable me to think. As I follow my cribbed variant of her proposition, the appearance of the word “rhetoric” feels redundant, like the writer’s own body *expressive vehicle of persuasion* as if no one’s body were ever on the line. Still, I strain to grasp an idea as obvious as blood as if that idea were identical to what is closest to me, exposing the opacity of my own perception, the way language threatens to anaesthetize the capacity to sense anything at all. It’s like trying to smell Mallarmé’s floral bouquet even as the flowers themselves are forever lost to the word “flowers.”

This reminds me of another sentence that’s haunted me ever since I read it some years ago: “An absolute distance lives inside the most proximate closeness” (was it Wittgenstein? was it Woolf?) tho I’d prefer to invert the sequence of phrases and adjust the diction as I obsess on the ways in which a living intimacy inhabits even the most distant relations. Conceptual opposites persist in and through one another, arousing a feeling in my gut, like the sensation of falling I’ve come to associate with

the dialectic, the feeling of my organs giving way to a void, the way a proposition like “the rhetoric of blood presents itself directly to the senses” gives way to its own negation. Logic opens like a chute inside a sentence as it yields an impression kin to freefall.

Can a poem feel the void in feeling that allows me to feel anything at all? When habit has me holding on *as if for dear life* to the idea of blood as immediate sensation, I hold the feeling of an absolute distance, at once spectacular and sentimental as it holds an intimate closeness.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance

In which people burn

(George Oppen)

“The rhetoric of blood. It presents itself directly to the senses.” Yes, but only to the degree that someone’s body *whose?* becomes the vehicle of our transport, carrying feeling from nonsense to sense. Maybe this is what Norma means. If the dialectic opens like a chute inside my gut, what does this carriage feel like? And what am I feeling when I write this?

Like a rhetorical instrument, my body is replete with these feelings, every gesture making meaning in excess of what common sense can grasp.

We want to say

‘Common sense’

And cannot. We stand on

That denial

Of death that paved the cities.

(George Oppen)

Like ‘common sense,’ the rhetoric of blood is shot-thru with contested meaning as it hardens inside social antagonism and it can only present itself directly to the senses by denying the blood to which it refers while the rhetoric called ‘common sense’ works to turn that denial on its head. But what if, contrary to common sense, the rhetoric of blood denoted not my body—or yrs—but the volatile space between these sensations, the common place from which our meanings together emerge?

Lost between sentence and sentience *at once block and blank, obstruction and possibility* I’m suspended in the absence of sensation that this proposition declares and the suspense is unbearable. I read the word “blood,” and it’s as if I can see it pooling round a body [—] laid bare in the street as my senses incline toward a common place. Unable to perceive anything at all, I substitute his cum on my belly, prosthetic of that rhetoric charged to bring me closer to an absent feeling.

Maybe the obvious analogy is with film, as if I could say “the *image* of blood presents itself directly to the senses,” and be any closer to naming that false immediacy. Like an idiot I’m trying to grasp the rhetoric of blood as if I could ever touch “the interval” separating framed images, which Vertov says constitutes the structure of cinematic perception, a film’s plastic support, the space between sensations being inseparable from sensation itself as it creates the impression of immediacy. In other words, to feel an image can only be to feel the structure of this feeling.

The degree to which this sensation appears to be properly my own—as if anything could present itself directly to my senses—is the degree to which an image becomes a phantom feeling, an animated residue of distilled money that looks and sounds like whatever might appeal to my audition were I to receive a voicemail from myself. What I feel is the absence of blood—*the body itself, my theater of displacement*—without hearing that ceasura, that opening in perception.

Poetry is the rhetoric of blood—even as it challenges every rhetoric—arousing sensation to loosen this feeling of my body’s dislocation.