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Letter from Cal Bedient dated April 27, 1992

Calvin Bedient

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April 26, 1992

Dear Patricia,

Thanks for your call back & the good news re; the taped interview. I look forward to screening it.

I'm sorry I didn't respond earlier to your sheaf of poems--I didn't know it was new work, crying out for eyes, ears, a few words of acknowledgement that it had arrived in the world.

But now for some remarks, too few and ill-considered, under-considered, but at least from me to you ...

"Uncharted"

The chief problem I have with the poems is what I shall call accuracy-within-imaginative-freedom, or the wild-but-convincing? question. You will say, is this Cal Bedient talking, the one whose imagery is all over the place, like hair sticking up in terror? Yes, it is he, however inconsistent he be in being he ...

For instance, "Water running, the low cough of it all night"--I love this line except when I pause to reflect that continually running water is one thing, an intermittent cough another. (Besides, it recalls the coughing in "Gerontion."

The variant (?) image of "the hum / of cellos under bridges" erases the first image, the cough. Classical severity says, choose one, the more accurate-evocative one. You seem to defy classical severity as a practice, but this means that you dance on the edge of such dangers as The Arbitrary, The Merely Stabbed At, the Willfully Far Out. You have no castration dead, you know ...

Again, "Dragging... feet in there" and "inner currents" do not blend comfortably; currents don't drag, they pull things along, including themselves.

I like much of this poem--much, much--but, to name other spots that trouble me, I find it a strain to equate a "flare" with things "piled" on one another; they are concepts that don't touch. And I can't picture corkscrews changing foothold, or; more to the point, loons twisting, especially from foothold to foothold, especially if said loons are plunging, which makes them beat-first, not foot-first. Then, too, the scribbles would erase themselves from tablets before they would do so from boxes--why bring in boxes at all? And anchors are for preventing drifting ("anchors drifting"); and why have ribbons threading downstream, when the stream itself is a sort of threading? Wouldn't the ideas swimming below the world be more than just "barefoot"? Wouldn't they be quite without clothes? I love the last three lines, which are all firm but adventurous imagination, without any wavering, ambiguity...
regarding precision.

"Stream"--

Yes, stream is your aesthetic, and this poem streams wonderfully. I'm not convinced by the back of an immense dying crocodile, and what sort of "plates" are these? The streetlights seem rather external (compared even to the digital clock), their ticking and policing not the best preparation for a final segue to the stream figure, but the poem ends deeply, and indeed the whole thing is magnificently flung for, allowed to happen. You're a kayak poet, you like the steepest grades, the jumps and turns and striking forward.

"The 3 Tortoise Secret"--

Here the sea of the meadow, the white thing that could be a beached whale (stripped to white bone?) or a "solitary godhead, ticking" (aren't these wild alternatives, don't they convey the arbitrariness of your imagining rather than a focus on something that constrains your imagination to a more-than-usual accuracy?), the rolling breadfruit, the veins trickling through twisting fjords, illustrate what I mean by less-than-convincing moments of imagination. For me, this poem is too too all over the place, not a stream but a--words fail me. It's too channel-defying, range-busting, for me to do more than gape at it. I know that I'm not "getting" much of what you're doing. I could stand a more linear version of it, which is not to say that I make a cult of the linear.

"In the Lobby"--

This poem is linear like a string of fire crackers, linear like passion; I love it, but I won't comment on it in detail, it's too much like describing other people's children to them--too easy to say the not-quite-right-thing.

"The Word Float"--

Another of your Brownian-motion poems, the particles threatening to break away into different universes. The connection between "the word float" (which doesn't seem to mean the word "float") and the motel pool, which relates to float but not to words, is intriguingly difficult, but to me not solveable ... I don't "get" "two pieces sagging into one." 2 pieces of what? One what? I can't see bikinis as wallowing.

The lines on the grasses lifting, etc., are lovely--different from the rest, classical, plain! Also the lines on the daisy, the small flags fluttering--less plain, but imaginable, the shift from wheel to flags surprising, not bewildering.
Say "it"—what? ("if we could only say it") Why the comma after "then live it"? The comparison "sweet as milk" imposes milk upon water, in a way—to me, an unsatisfying movement.

The soaring need that climbs heaven—this seems something willed to be said. I'm not convinced that this abstract section adds, as against detracts, from the poem. Nor is the imagining of black seeds sprinkled on water, let alone "like salt," a compelling one; it seems arbitrary—fantastic. And a radiant bird is not likely to resemble a halo, in my experience. And the transformation into nickels, dimes, etc., seems, again, willful—a dictate of theme, perhaps. "Like a lost key, holding its breath"—"key" and "breath" don't belong together, in my sense of things, and "lost key" recalls "lost chord," Victorian England's favorite tune ...

How are flies tight? And why even so many as a "few drops" on the skin at night?

You probably have good answers to all these queries, but I'm indicating, not helpfully I'm afraid, where I stumble ...

"Danger of Falling—"

"Like an ear of corn"—vivid! "Stuffed into her jeans / like a stick of butter"—why? Because she can be melted down? Why "a double pronged nail / in the mind"? I can't picture the feet as iron struck into the sky. Maybe our imaginations inhabit parallel universes, and so can't meet without trouble?

Perhaps "greasy as Coca Cola for franchise / does Coca Cola still need separate franchises of its own? / the Pepsi blimp floats on the horizon" could be struck out.

Eyes peering over collar suggest very low-placed eyes, no face:
"thinks of herself on Main Street ... up here among ... clouds"—a wrench down and back up, for why?

"like a bird clamped to the wire / of the plane"—she had better be in the plane, not on it as on a wire.
what's precarious about a wooden clothespin? How can a shell be lost twig by twig? the mixing of images is troubling.
No, there was never a launching pad in a distant galaxy ...

Drop the lines on this pad and down to "here all I am"? "her teeth"—imagination's?
To beam down is to arrive, if all goes well, with a body, of course, so "bodiless" must refer to a later, a "when I'm gone." In any case, it comes in with a jolt. And to be bodiless in air is only to be gone to sight.
"Ballast"--

What sidles up doesn't necessarily twist, and if it sidles up "from" the mind's fishbowl, not in it, it must emerge, land outside somehow. But now if "his goggle eyes" are still "flattened against the glass"? The shift to "ship" from "fishbowl" seems to ask a lot of indulgence from the reader, and "bicycle" doesn't pedal well in water. This poem moves too arbitrarily for me (e.g., scales curled on the cutting room floor"), in a mish-mash, fiddle-sidle arrangement of things.

So now you may be thinking, "My God, I entrusted my poems to this dunderhead." I do find their movement at once intriguing and, at times, bewildering, as if you were playing chords with a hand that spreads notes and notes wider than mine and hence in a way that makes me wonder that such a thing is being done, actually being done . . .

I love it that your poems are wilderness, are America-as-it-was and still-is-for-poets.

Love,

Cal