

S P L E E N



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Poems

Starling Shout-Out

Girly Man

Neo Colossus

So-Called

Rexx Emperor

Black Swan Events

Chicxulub

Inflatable Man

Combobulator

plus graphics

cover image: oil slick @

<http://time.com/4276973/oil-spill-prevention/>

Starling Shout-Out

Several hundred common starlings were released in 1890 into New York's Central Park by Eugene Schieffelin. He was president of the American Acclimatization Society, which tried to introduce every bird species mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare into North America. See Steve Mirsky, "Call of the Reviled," *Scientific American*, 1 June 2008.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/call-of-the-reviled/>

“The common starling is a noisy bird.” —Wikipedia

Drilling the mulch with its yellow
 prod of a beak, gimme that, gotcha
 punk with short-tailed swagger and swank
 an iridescent sheen on basic black
 unctus oils spilling the spectrum
 in the right light more, ever more, over
 the whole continent from first clawhold
 just another New York City migrant—
 a murmur as American as you are,
 chump, & don't you forget it,
 anything can make a nest, even trash, omni-
 vore and scavenger, take that! \$@#%~!?\$
 POW! plus a knack for bone-grinding sounds,
 such pops & scrunches from its
 masticating noise-maw you'd think
 you'd got a glimpse into the raw where
 speech come from, as buzz-sounds
 break it down to pips and quawks
 the tags & undulineaments of
 all that's new

Girly Man

HARD
or
S.T.F.U.
read the tough-guy T-shirts

Don't Tread On Me
Gotta Right to SWAGGER Every Day
Thou Shalt Not Criticize the Beard
Real Men Neuter Their Pits
I'm Working
or
(a rarity)
DEATH FROM ABOVE

Your "assets"
or your "junk"
wealth or waste
—what's up with that?

Tonight
it's smack-
down time —
talkin'
motocross smack
in body armor
as Spidey-web tattoos
attack
each elbow
and a barbed-wire
("bob-wire"?)
black tat band
is flexed by a
bicep

Or these signs:
"Para ti
podemos obtener
el reembolso
que mereces."
"Your Data. Access.
Control. Security."

If you think these XXXL
man-cave mantras
seem, like, a little
scared . . . just
Rotate On This

Time to tap out
now so, yo!
let's end it with

Tiny dolls tied
to the front grill of
dump or trash
trucks
legs and arms splayed
shock and awe
on the face —
these are always
good for a few
yucks
like Mr. Bill “oooooh . . . noooo . . .
Mr. Hands” jokes
on classic Saturday Night
Live jive

But
turn around
shall come
around behind to
poke ya —
fuck —
ain't so
funny now
is it? —
child-self
squoshed
on the grill
like a bug by
our big
ole boy
SuperSized
trucked-up
Self

Written while listening to some alternative masculinities:

- Sonny Sharrock, “Many Mansions,” from *Ask the Ages* (1991), Axiom/Island Records, with Sonny Sharrock (electric guitar and composer), Pharaoh Saunders (tenor and soprano saxophones), Elvin Jones (drums), and Charnett Moffett (bass)
- Toumani Diabaté, *The Mandé Variations* (2008), World Circuit/Nonesuch.
Toumani Diabaté (kora)



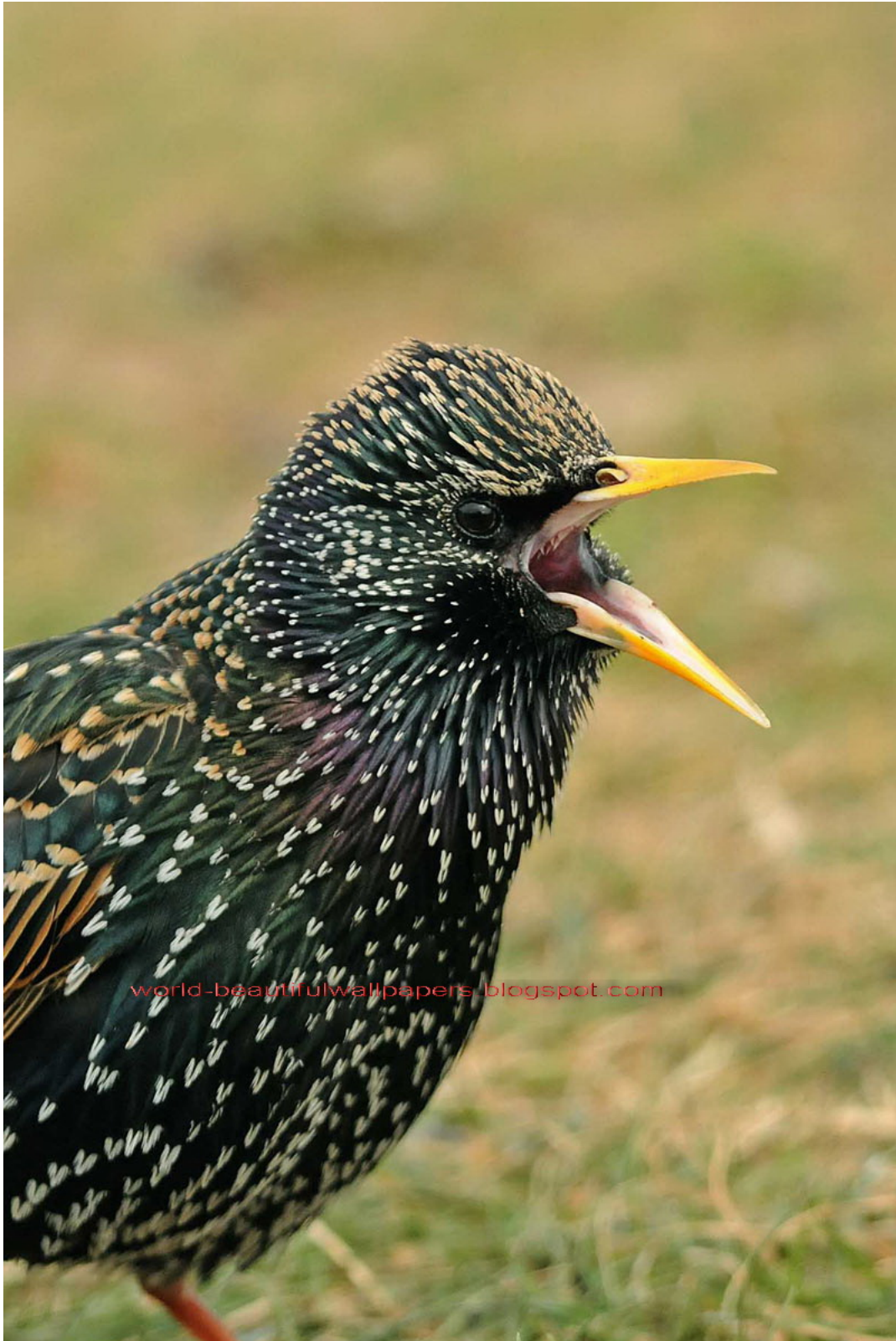
The Neo Colossus

(aka Emma Lazarus' Statue of Liberty Poem, Revised 2017-)

"Give me your privileged, not poor,
Your neoliberals yearning to invest,
Entrepreneurs stuffed with d'or galore:
For us, elite and Christian now are best,
I lift my lamp beside our gold-plate door!"

So-Called

They say English has no rhyme for orange
So this satire goes on an alt-rhyme binge
To twit Cheeto-puff, alt-white, unpresidented Trumpf
Who on our Constitution squats taking a dump:
Oligarchy's grinnin' and jivin' Gilded Age whore-age.



Rexx Emperor

(for Rex Tillerson, Exxon CEO then U.S. Secretary of State, 2017-2018,
Emperor of State and Energy polity until fired by a tweet)

Rexx Emperor of Exxon Petroleum
drives our phalanx of desert storm
troopers to exact ordinary
and extraordinary rendition
protecting a global network of sites
gifted with such sci-fi or Seussian names
the euphonious appellations of oil extraction:

Bakken and Burgan
Marcellus, Gulf, and Prudhoe Bay
Majnoon, Tengiz, and Ghawar
Safaniya and Ku-Maloob-Zaap
Edop, Oso, Ekpe, and Ubit
Priobskoye and SACROC

We're proud to be open and honest about
oil companies at the helm of State now
no more Navy men or Federalist Society law profs
at Energy, nor even a long-haired nuclear physicist
The name of the game is and always has been
unlimited access and energy transfer

Standing Rock in 2016 an annoying
blip of free speech resistance
liquified gradually and then quickly
by attack dogs, pepper spray, water
cannons, concussion grenades, Blackwater
surveillance, helicopters, tanks,
private security forces, North Dakota
state police, police from neighboring states,
Army engineers, body armor, plastic cuffs,
and a Great Plains winter. The arrested
Indians and allies disappear
into out-of-state holding camps
no way to contact anyone for weeks
... and all that goes down under a "liberal" leader
who once got a star-quilt and prayers from
the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Dakota.

[new stanza]



January 2017: KXL bulldozers freed to fire up again
by a new president's razor-wire-wall signature
Minions Rexx at State and Perry at Energy
and Army Corps cavalry engineers mount up:

lubricity tense with toxicity stokes
nations high on c-c-c-c-carbon tokes

we love our throaty exhaust-pipe rumblin'
so Mad-Max-sexy for cruisin' and tumblin'

our fracked-up futures, our light sweet crudes
gaseous fumes & smokestack lightning blues

apoplex apocalypse—

<https://lithub.com/protest-art-and-the-fight-for-standing-rock/>



Black Swan Events 2010 —
oil ode

Start with a brown pelican
soaked in crude and croaking
clean as many as you can but
conscience can't come clear

Louisiana shrimp and oil festivals
suddenly swabbed in sludge
demonic commingling
of separate income streams

Corporate coastal blow-ups
Nigeria come home to "our" Gulf
exploding pipeline third-degree
burns for bayous and villagers

Rigs and their networks a cash
cornucopia for some, not even squat
for most—after the blow-out, dispersant
mists drift down on surface skeins of

glop while deepwater oil
plumes circle then silently move
up the food chain like
default swaps cycling

inside the credit system—
What happened to BOP
our blowout preventer?
and where can we find ASAP

a solution inventor?
There's a gulf gulf gulf
between rich and poor
awake and asleep

addicted and free
and we're all dipped in it now
North South East and West—
glug glug glug gulf glug

glug gulp



Chicxulub

Tcheek-sooloob
incoming!

we've igneous pride
in our Anthropocene

smarts but
—maybe—

we're obscene

& not smart enough
to not out-smart

ourselves
cooking up our own

Chicxulub
acidification soup

stir in Deccan Traps's
sulfuric spews

this new stew's
a slo-mo bolide for now

just a flash
in the bluest eye

of our globe
as it spins in space

but on course
so far—maybe—

to cenote us

who like to name
epochs after us

& dub ourselves
so sapiens

but can't seem to
see Homo

not here
erased effaced

—though
Earth can.

Proliferations
follow extinctions

but what's
extinct does not

return. Word.
Poems

pose problems
as if

to answer
you must

change your life.

Inflatable Man



So much depends upon
Air Dancers™
convulsing by
roadsides &
strip malls
our carnival
freak show
shills now
proudly part of
the show as
well as the ad
for what's sold—
20-foot plastic

Inflata-Bots
pawing at us
not with rapid-
fire patter but
with silence
gyrating
bodies &
a pump
down low

Manic smiles
electrocuted hair
and up-
raised arms
announcing
some kind of
insane
victory dance
logos on torso
twarkin'
and doin' the
Ripple Pulse &
the Jerkin' Sway

Air Puppets
& Fly Guys—
pumped up
they snap
straight
Tube Dudes stoked
with ecstatic
certainty what
you buy
will be IT!!
what! you!
always! wanted!!
LIT!!!

Then
the pump base cuts
to low speed
causing
a sudden
crumple
smile
gone sideways
body kinked &
arms akimbo
a flutter calling for help

How is *that*
supposed to push
the product?

though
it's true—
as we
flow by
in traffic
collapse grabs
our attention
as well as
peak pitch
happiness
tumescence—
maybe *any*
eyeball
action is
good just
keep it
always
movin'

The pump
kicks in again
& the
cycle of
shock and
awe renews
us sold on
and sold on
the hair-
raising show
day in
and day out
wave
your hands
smile &
salute

Suckkkaaaaaas

~~~~~

Find your own Air Dancer examples. Kids love 'em!

Here's one that's an ad and one that's a dancer's affectionate parody/tribute (?):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHVnDMv0lT0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEpAWQGKAnY>



## Combobulator

A running record of all thoughts that pass  
through my mind in a half-hour segment of time:  
that's hard work to do. I find I'm  
either writing about writing—actually,  
writing about being self-conscious about writing,  
like now—or I've forgotten to write things down or  
even take notes because I'm lost in thought  
and now have to scramble to catch up.  
When that happens I'm unsure of what I  
should do—should I note down quickly  
all the different thought-strings before it's too late  
(some seem to have a half-life of only a few seconds,  
like sparks shooting up from a fire, though after that  
they still rise as specks of gray) or should I  
record one thing that I thought about as  
fully as I can, hoping I'll remember the others  
and can turn to them in turn? Another thought:  
what makes me suddenly stop thinking of x  
and think of y, without being aware that I switched,  
much less knowing why, if *why* is the right word?

I remember a Poe story about two friends  
walking down a street in Paris. The first one  
either says something or sees something and the other  
notices what his companion does. They then continue  
walking in silence for five minutes or so. Suddenly,  
(and I'm paraphrasing/revising from memory now)  
the second one says, "Yes, there *is* a link  
between the French revolution and the rise  
of the family-owned Boulangerie in the nineteenth-century,"  
and his friend says, "My God, you just took the words  
off the tip of my tongue! How did you know what I was thinking?"  
The second man then responds, "the association of ideas.  
When you remarked on x, I knew you well enough to know  
that that would make you think of y, which would in turn lead to z  
and then to a, b, c, d, and so on to e,  
the Boulangerie comment, at which point I decided to jump in."  
(Peter, you don't remember that story very well,  
do you? Poe's characters don't talk like that.  
But now it's too late; you've brought it up. Also,  
your example is having real Möbius problems:  
its alphabet is looping around on itself.)

[stanza break]

I was—I am—intrigued by Poe's tale, though, whose name  
I can't remember right now: it made it all seem so simple.  
The trajectory of thought, the ordered dendrites of memory  
in reverse, the dream that if one person knew another  
well enough (talk about begging the question)  
he or she or they (careful with those pronouns)  
could follow lines of thought like tracing  
a family tree branching right left right right right left  
down to the birth of Alphonse your second cousin  
or whatever. Poe's famous for depicting the mind's  
chaos and repressions, but what really drives him  
is this diagram of detection, this anatomy chart,  
and like any good anatomist he seems more fascinated  
with disease and variation than with the generic  
and the healthy. What's also odd is that the story  
after I read it had such a strange life or afterlife  
in my memory. An hour after finishing it, I bet, I couldn't  
have quoted the precise thoughts Poe had his characters use  
to make their points. In fact, look at what the pathetic examples  
I substituted for them—a Boulangerie and  
algebraic shorthand! Part of me wants to stop writing as fast  
as I can and go dig up that story and find out  
what Poe really said. But this story-within-the-story,  
this thought-diagram, seems to have stuck in my brain  
indelibly, not because it's true but because  
it's such a precise description of how  
the brain hardly *ever* works. I can't explain why I should  
forget all the details and remember only the story's  
hieroglyph of itself imbedded in its midst, much less  
why suddenly a thumbnail dissertation  
on Poe should interrupt here, when I'm  
supposed to be doing something else, talking about  
all the thoughts I had in a half-hour span. Usually  
I remember not organizing ideas but rather flashes and specks,  
odd details that give no clue as to why they stuck  
to my flypaper memory, much less what they are supposed  
to mean or lead to. All those synapses firing so excitedly  
to be thinking about Poe again after all these months  
—Dupin! that was one of the characters, a detective,  
the first detective, high priest of light and intellect,  
yet doesn't his name sound a little like dupe, or like  
someone who deceives?—all those synapses firing

mean that the light-traces of many other thoughts that I should have or might have written down have now gotten

erased. ... What are those nifty chambers physicists used to use to record the trajectory of subatomic particles spun off from atom-smashing? Cloud chambers, I think. Nice name. Sounds like sites where clouds are made. Anyway, there are photos I've seen somewhere, in *The Tao of Physics* maybe, a book I never finished, showing subatomic flight-paths used as evidence for something, perhaps for the fact that there was something there to record as evidence. Everything seems to take place in milli-trilli-milli seconds, and the physicists who discover particles have the right to think of clever new names like *quark* for them, the one time I'd really like to be a physicist. (Now that you bring it up, the word *quark* is quirky; it left its first trace in James Joyce and then disappeared, only to pop up in someone's physics paper years later.) What's really eerie about the cloud chambers is that some of their markings are like doodling or marginalia. There are curly-cues and baby spirals (perfectly formed) and things that look just like streaks and cross-outs, or secret codex keys. Of course I've got to admit I don't know a damn thing about how to read those lines or even if those lines are the ones to read. Maybe they are the markings of the atmosphere in the chamber, the clouds, excited by all those foreigners, the subatomics, shooting through their midst, not marks of the particles themselves. Maybe I've been reading the wrong marks all along and have missed the real tell-tales—look at those little smudgy thingies off to one side, for example—are they really “off to one side” or are they the point (the vanishing point) of the whole “page”? I don't even know for sure what I mean by “marks,” actually. After all, we're not talking about paper and pencil here. How could clouds in a chamber record anything? Clouds of what? And why would you use clouds to write with, anyway? Physics is hard enough as it is.

I'm really lost now. I can't even remember how I got onto this business about cloud chambers. I just started thinking, I mean writing, about it, I guess, remembering that Zen book and then images from the Web. I could look back earlier, to a previous page, and find out, but that would be cheating, I think,

and I would have to put my writing on pause.  
Here I am actually writing things down  
rather than just thinking them, and I still can't remember  
how I made a transition, or had one spiral off of me.  
I got started thinking of that cloud chamber because  
I was writing; it blustered its way in because  
of the recording process, as another analogy for it—  
“here, take me, I'm the best, I'll work!”—  
whereas what I was supposed to do, I think, was to write  
about thought before it was thinking about writing,  
I mean writing about thinking. And this whole thing  
started when I decided, heroically I hoped, that since  
I was planning on giving such a free-writing assignment  
to my students I should do it myself too, just to learn  
how it feels, and maybe what to warn them against.  
Poetic justice, sort of. But when I sat down to do it  
I wondered (I remember it all so clearly now),  
“how do I start?” You can't just say, “OK, begin,”  
because then your first thoughts are about the project  
and how you've started off not on the right foot but  
by thinking about how awkward a beginning you're  
making, sort of like a starter at a race who forgets  
to fire the pistol in the air and instead shoots himself  
in the foot, or forgets to fire it at all and just starts  
running himself and barely a moment passes before  
he is chased by the others. The best way to start is in the middle  
of the race, of course, or in the middle of something that  
isn't even a race, since then you'll just be running as fast  
as you can, not worrying about making a false start.  
Question: some track races, the longer ones, have what they  
call *staggered starts*—an odd name for it. How did they  
figure out how far ahead to put all the runners but the  
one on the inside track? Each one is in a different place  
in their lane. Someone had to carefully calculate  
the concentric curves and the straight lines, making  
sure that everyone runs the same distance before  
they all can cross to the inside lane and run together.  
Has anyone checked the math lately?

What I'm trying  
to say is that I was going to get going by using memories  
of heading into Philadelphia with friends to see  
a Bay Area Chicano comedy troupe called Culture Clash,  
bursting with skits about Julio Iglesias  
(whose name means July Churches) and tough guys called



cholos and what would happen if Ché Guevera came back to our present and how the NEH (before it got gutted) used to love to fund postmodern performance art filled with angst by “Hispanics” with college degrees. I could understand some but not most of the jokes in Spanish, but all of the Spanish jokes when they were spoken in a parody of an Anglo accent. I also remember them saying that now there can be lots of Blacks on TV but they’re all caught in the same three comedy plots again and again. And that there are hardly any Hispanics, I mean Latinxs, much less vatos y rucas, on English-language TV, not even in McDonald's ads, which even show occasional Asians, though I’ve noticed they’re on for just a few seconds, less time than the McNuggets, actually, and when they do show up, the Latinxs I mean, it’s almost always on crime shows and they’ve got to be wearing bandanas or silk suits if they’re men or a cross between their breasts if they’re women—unless they’re Carmen Miranda, who seems to have been sentenced to sing and dance forever on American Movie Classics while balancing on her head all the fruit packed in a single day for the United Fruit Company.

The audience was laughing and shouting encouragement when the jokes started to hit home. In 1996 one of the group’s founding members, José Antonio Burciaga, died, only 56 years old. Before I stop, a few stories about this “meester Burciaga” (his parody of a parody accent when describing himself). Organizer, reader and advisor, instigator of that most dangerous rebel force of all—laughter. He grew up living in the basement of a synagogue because that’s where his family lived—his father was custodian and polished the menorah, chased off burglars, made sure the eternal light stayed lit. Just three books to his name: *Undocumented Love*, *Drink Cultura*, and *Spilling the Beans*. Plus lots of time as a counsellor keeping Stanford students sane and angry. One of his best perpetrations was a set of murals in the Chicano center, including “Mythology of Maize,” with Quetzacoatl creating a cholo with a tear tattoo on his left cheek, and “The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes,” which includes food-service workers of all colors, male and female, in their white Stanford uniforms. The murals are right in the shadow of the Hoover Tower—Hoover as in ex-prez Herbert Hoover, Tower as in get some rich friends to put up a tall tribute to the man who said that the cause

of the Depression was too many Mexicans working in the U.S.—and the Anglo newsrags agreed. After riffing on and hoovering the Hoover for a while, Burciaga changed direction with a favorite tale about a gift he once got—a prayer card for San Martín Caballero, the Patron Saint of the Unemployed. The card was shipped to him first-class, anonymously, protected in a container his friends joked not even the U.S. Postal Service could destroy—an airline sickness bag. He swore this was a true story. And he ended it with a punch line: “what the gringos need now is a border sickness bag....” When Burciaga did stand-up he would wear a machete tucked inside his belt, a battered campesino hat, and lug onstage a bag filled with other props. His m.o. was *relajo* and *rasquachismo*—save and recycle, improv and improve, make do a lot with a little, taunt and call out, make ‘em squirm but make ‘em laugh too. And, above all, make light of it all, show people a way beyond all this. Like that story Guillermo Gómez-Peña tells of families south of San Diego who one night decided they’d had enough of angry white folks driving down to the border in their armored Cherokee and Escalade sport-utes to shine their headlights onto the other side, performing some kind of Border Patrol vigilante shit. Mexican families got sick of it and came one night in a large group and stood in the glare. Then they suddenly flashed mirrors bouncing those dim brights right back to their source. They also brought candles, cupping them in their hands against the desert wind, y canciones. Al fin, cuentos para ti, Tony. “¡Que viva!”

Since I said “al fin” I guess I’m at the end. “Closure,” it’s called now. Actually, *closure*’s an interesting word. (Uh oh, now he’s starting up again.) I learned it just a few years ago, when all of a sudden ill-lit lit professors started using it to talk about endings. The word *closure* is really soft and lush in the way it sounds, like a velvet door smoothly drifting shut on well-oiled hinges, while these days our notions about what happens with endings seems filled with eruptions, unclosed parentheses, repressions, intertwinings, tear tattoos, & who knows what else. I don’t have time now to spiel all the memories that light up along the network triggered by a word like *closure*, not to mention the word *clash*. My half hour was up about a half hour ago.

The sun's parallelogram streaming in the windows  
of our imaginary shared room is now to the left  
of these pages, not to the right of them, and my wrists

are kind of burning. Dupin and Burciaga,  
Auguste and Tony, wherever you are,  
can you take it from here?



