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Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch

‘A Squeeze of the Hand’

From antiquity to the present, social theory has often fused critical and creative discourse, esoteric and exhibitionistic tendencies. Socrates and Diogenes first announced many of their most radical propositions in the Athenian marketplace. Thoreau sowed his solitary beans while remaining (as scholar Stanley Cavell suggests) just barely within his neighbours’ view. And now, as archivists of evanescent urban experience, as grazers of the public space, we have recorded forty-five-minute dialogues for thirty straight days around New York City.

Half these talks took place at a Union Square health-food store which, for legal reasons, we call ‘W.F.’ Other locations included MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Opera House, Central Park, Prospect Park, and a Tribeca parking garage. For this special issue on ‘Emergency/Emergence,’ we present the twentieth dialogue.

6:15 p.m. Sunday, 20 January

Union Square W.F.

A: ...late for my next activity, with you doing all these these preparations, then spend half the tape bottled up as I plan how to get someplace else on time. [*Silence*]

J: Well today I I'd not, I'm sorry. In the past I've run five to ten minutes late. I didn't know our start time was so important to you. Now that...

A: We've discussed it.

J: Oh, but in a joking manner. Today my train sat in a tunnel. I'll be happy to eliminate the A from my life. Since — we stopped in the tunnel for fifteen minutes. Sorry to...

A: It would it would be kind when you come late to fill just one water cup, rather than fill one then decide you need another and stand again. You do all these things that aren't necessary. *[Pause]* A real way to show concern is to accommodate the other person's needs. *[Silence]*

J: So do you have anything rosy to discuss? Or did you just want to bicker?

A: *[Muffled]* cumulative annoyance. *[Pause]* If you want rosy: I admire the books I watch New Yorkers read, highly specific books. I'll find girls on the subway with a book by Gogol I'd never even heard of (in English translation). *[Long silence]*

J: You saw kids in a a café near Kristin's during our walk last night, and hypothesized they'd come back from the opera. Growing up in Manhattan produces good taste.

A: As, thanks for the tea. Um I wouldn't say that. I'd say it produces bourgeois competence. New York childhood may produce proficiency, something I'd only value combined...

J: Well I'll tell you: my subway got held up, and I grabbed some some water and tea since for the second time over the course of this project I can feel my health crumbling. Maybe all my recent walking produced exhaustion. Or it might be the resumption of bachelorhood. I'd spent such a splendid weekend with Amanda and my life feels pretty lonely now. I also think that corner drinking-fountain could have poisoned us, since water squirts...since the water pressure's so weak and we, and water doesn't rise far enough. I'll scrape my cup just to get some water. I probably drink other people's sickness.

A: For this reason I fill my cup halfway. *[Silence]* As for walking making you sick: I've felt the same. Again I've overdressed compared to most pedestrians. I think this might come from our

age (being thirty) and from part-sedentary, part-mobile habits. I notice increasingly dark rings around my eyes. But I'll bet new resiliencies develop as others die off. [*Long silence*]

J: Well that's cheerful to hear. I'm not sure what happened the past few days, though. I go to sleep at a reasonable hour, but don't wake until eleven. Maybe my...maybe I've gone into hibernation after the effort of our first nineteen talks. Now I need new strength to finish this project.

A: Maybe this bald man with cane just completed his twenty-sixth talk. [*Silence*] As you'll remember, on our walk down Manhattan several years ago, once we stopped for warm Mexican food finishing seemed impossible. I've wondered if we'll soon experience enervating, asymptotic effects. A point of solace for me has been this cleaning woman. I'll picture putting my arm around her without needing to communicate why. I hope that happens the final day.

J: Yeah, who knows where the last conversation will occur.

A: We'll...

J: And I'm coping with anxiety about my move. I've worried this new apartment might seem sketchy, if not to me then to friends or people I bring back. I hate being judged for eccentric living arrangements. So different factors combined to drag me down. I'm sorry you'd have to, I'm sorry you've suffered tension. It's sad to think you'll rush straight from here to your next engagement, but...

A: Forced to take subways instead of the walk I need.

J: yet it also would be nice for a friend to show some understanding and sympathy and...

A: I showed it the first fifteen times.

J: [*Muffled*] collaboration's not a great idea.

A: That's true. It's quite frustrating, even if it's a good thing to get frustrated by. [*Long silence*] I face my own residential concerns. I've used the same towel since before Thanksgiving, with

no free mornings or chance to do laundry. [Pause] As for anxiety about the new situation: I find when something momentous comes up — you know a writer I never thought would look at my work — that this always brings huge disappointment followed by confidence I hadn't been aware of. Such buoyancy will return to you. I wouldn't worry much.

J: Yeah if it doesn't come back I'd...well I'm sure it will. There's a poem from, or a W.S. Merwin translation of a two-line Japanese proverb:

Luck turns

Wait

and right now it's clear I've hit a lull (sleeping mysteriously late, feeling lonely, irritating my my best friend, potentially moving into a shitty apartment just to save \$300 per month) but we'll see. You know, I heard good news last night. Alex's film got into the Washington DC festival.

A: The Merwin figure — I'd assume that's an Asian Figure you recited — presents simple, almost non-existent syntax. I've noticed lately as I read that after ten sentences I start swirling. Often a gerund's responsible. I'm curious if this happens to you and to other intelligent readers.

J: Hmm, when I sit and read hours each day, I'll lose my ability to make sense of what I'm reading. The whole effort seems enigmatic.

A: You don't consider that necessary to becoming...

J: Um it may be necessary, though in the end the cost could climb too high. I know after three days preparing a *Moby Dick* writing sample my relationship with language grew tense and unpleasant. Nothing I read made sense to me. All words started to sound the same and I couldn't replace one with another. I thought of last weekend — how, when lying in bed with Amanda or crossing Central Park, words came easily. I did my best work then. I'd bring an abundance of topics to our conversations. Now I feel empty.

A: I've felt empty this whole time. I'm more intrigued by extended conversation that originates in emptiness. I want talk that blows like scraps on the street. I'll find when I forget why people choose one word over the other it's best to, as I've said, read aloud. Immediately it becomes obvious why one word works better.

J: Right. But my relationship to language turns so tenuous I'll forget the meaning of words.

A: That that's the exciting part. It's most like thinking, or physical motion. What happens then?

J: Well a few seconds of blankness fill my mind, during which I'll try to put myself back together and discern the elusive meanings of a given word. In most cases the word is ordinary. It happened Friday with 'rank,' for example. I'd compared Ishmael's status to other members of the Pequod — noting his rank remains marginal. Sq...he has to squeeze spermaceti lumps into fluid...

A: Sure.

J: and his rank seems minor next to those drawing oil from a captured whale's head.

A: Somebody strokes his fingers, right?

J: Yes it's from the memorable chapter 'A Squeeze of the Hand'. I write about this in my paper. Though the word 'rank' became...all the sudden I couldn't tell if 'rank' was what I'd meant. For a minute I felt detached from language. I sat still and realized 'rank' did in fact...

A: Yet I don't think of 'rank' as ordinary. I find 'rank' exceptional. Not only for the pleasant sound — well I guess for its pleasant nasal sound. But there's also ambiguity between 'rank' as neutral classification and 'rank' as negative state of being. There's The Smiths' album *Rank*. There's there's Ed Ruscha's *Tanks, Ranks, Banks and Thanks* (I hope I'm getting that right), the photo series. Military officers, did we...

J: I don't remember you citing this specific work.

A: Um...

J: You haven't.

A: Military officers form the ranks.

J: Including...

A: [*Muffled*] pictures of tanks. Banks, I think mostly Midwestern photographs. And then for 'Thank You': greetings found in old matchbooks. For this project Ruscha bought his own advertising slot in *Rags*. One of my favorite things Ed Ruscha would do is place ads endorsing his new work. I myself rarely feel that self-assertive. But Ruscha submitted *Thirty-Three Gasoline Stations* or whatever to the Library of Congress. They rejected it, so again he placed an advertisement when the submission fell through. Ed Ed Ruscha knew 'rank' was flexible. [*Pause*] I wonder how much of this will get recorded. We've had more noise behind us than any other day. We face the most crowded scene I can remember. [*Cough*] sense an impending chill. In Milwaukee it turned so cold I'd wrap a scarf around my mouth — not just the neck...

J: Sure I've...

A: covering lips.

J: had to do that in Minneapolis.

A: And you can feel those...

J: From...

A: days coming back.

J: They're on their way. I'll tell you, even if my new apartment looks sketchy, the location's ideal. I won't freeze on long walks if I choose not to, but perhaps what you say about language and pushing ourselves also applies to walks through the cold. Maybe if we risk our our comfort and walk a bit longer we'll open to heightened sensitivity.

A: I don't need heightened...

J: Apparently haiku poets find their subjects when they least expect them. Staring...

A: [*Muffled*] at their sentences. The subject of their sentence...

J: Right.

A: gets gleaned through its articulation. I feel the same.

J: Yeah for example Bashō once (totally exhausted) checked himself into an inn, a mountain inn where prostitutes slept, and through his window he saw the moon, and the moon struck him powerfully that night, given his trying circumstances. He wrote um:

Staying at inn
where prostitutes sleep—
bush clover and the moon. [*Silence*]

A: You'd mentioned your new location. I would take advantage of Anthology Film Archive. They put on great programs but we've discussed this — sometimes movies billed in magazines do not play. Their marquee's more accurate. I think I'd watch 1.5 films per week.

J: I'll remember hiding out in the second-floor bathroom, so we could enjoy free double-features which...

A: Hmm.

J: is a lot of fun. A few Jonas Mekas films playing this month sound wonderful. One lasts three hours. It features diary scenes from his first year in New York, and the...

A: Don't they all?

J: Not all of them. He made a documentary about a fellow Lithuanian artist. But yeah, the film that depicts his first years in New York contains footage from various poetry readings. He captures Frank O'Hara, or Allen...

A: Does this film track big protests? Do you know?

J: I've never seen...

A: Maybe on the SUNY Buffalo campus? I saw it during a gallery show in Chelsea last fall. Um, regarding the Bashō moon experience, I had one today. Arranging dissertation ideas I saw humidifier mist get siphoned off into the fan. This quiet little cyclone shared the air with Kristin and I. I thought of how dragons, Chinese dragons in Chinese paintings, emerge from the convergence of mist, ocean and air. I'll spend most days in Kristin's room with us spun away from each other, with her hearing my lips smack a thick peanut-butter sandwich.

J: Be...

A: And besides self-consciousness chewing I find it all pleasant. On Friday in the airport a boy kissed walls, really smacking his lips. My own lip-smacking behind Kristin felt awkward but equally sensual.

J: Here's Florence the security guard.

A: She'd seemed stressed Monday night. She...

J: Well I've...

A: strutted across this room but looked so stiff making the 'Broken glass' announcement.

J: Yeah, well she became a full-time student. This is her first semester back in many years.

A: Spring semester, or fall...

J: The spring term...

A: Where?

J: She commutes to a business college down on Wall Street. If someone doesn't study the humanities they'll take five classes per semester. I know I'm happiest taking two. Yet I don't understand how she could attend five courses in addition to working forty hours a week.

A: [*Cough*] less invested and more pragmatic. I remember, for no apparent reason, take taking seven classes while working twenty hours — no fifteen, and also volunteering. I felt guilt spending my parents' money. Then I moved east and my perspective changed; it appeared I'd never been offered enough.

J: If I look back, I'll call to mind books over which I've strained and remember little. But I'm happy I had the slow, voluptuous, maddening experience of concentration and...in other words, I've started to agree it's good to reach a breaking point with language. I'm most capable of that when I take two classes.

A: Such moments happen independent of me searching for them. [*Pause*] I'll wonder if, when you work at W.F., do you come in to open register twelve at 5:30, or is it a more chaotic enterprise — more like catering?

J: I'm I'm sorry I spaced out on this girl's pink sweatpants. Would you rephrase the question?

A: Sure. I noticed the sweatpants. They're distracting since the hue matches her hat. Also pink in winter always distracts me. I'd asked if cashiers arrive knowing which register they'll work, if they can envision their place with...

J: Well...

A: Or does someone assign slots as they get here?

J: my mother works as a cashier (not at W.F., but at a St. Louis store called Shop 'n Save) and she's told ahead of time where she'll begin. Though in the middle of the shift managers might move...