

# It Might Just Be Ravens Writing in Mid-Air

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## A Small Start

And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.

T. S. Eliot, from Quartet No. 4, Section 5 of “Four Quartets” (lines 36–39)

But then something about the sentence that followed stuck out. *As a kid, I was just a kid.* It sounds like a line from a Bill Callahan song. Is he saying, “Let’s leave that alone,” because there is something deeper he doesn’t want to discuss, or is it that there is really nothing there? Does it matter?

Mark Richardson (2013, n.p.) from “A Window That Isn’t There: The Elusive Art of Bill Callahan”

**I**T MATTERS, but just *how* it matters and *how much* and *to whom* and *to what end* is not just a tough call but a call that needs to be considered again and again, at every turn of circumstance. This is part of the sweet frustration of the interpretive life, that there is no single declaration. Stories get retold in the bury of the circumstances that call for them. And the pedagogical art of sensing that call is itself a practice, part of whose efficacy and worth is linked intimately to the very tale it considers.

Thus, the places, the locales of consideration—with all their convoluted stories and memory and fantasy and desire and inhabitants—have something to say, here, too. An interpretive consideration of my “self,” like my consideration of any other considered matter, is not aimed at:

a “thing” with properties to be discovered and named under regimes of “control, prediction and manipulation” (Habermas, 1972, p. 21), but is, rather, a long, contested, and emergent lineage of images, ideas, choices, possibilities, oclusions, inclusions, victories, defeats, silences and voices. The object being considered by interpretive work *is* this very various-

ness. “Only in the multifariousness of voices does it exist” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 284). (Jardine, 2019b, p. 20)

Thus, Ravens being nearby, eyeing, can change everything, as can the exhilaration of reading such a lovely line, noting it, citing it, here, now, as a gesture of whiling and remembering, and singing back. Thus, too, the language of interpretive work swirls and dips, not because it is a poetic consideration of something simple, clear, and straightforward, but because its object *is* multifarious, voiced and re-voiced from the angles of trees and Ravens and other lives’ sounds. Its object calls for a type of expression that tries to cleave well to and to find its measure in that very object.

### A Second Start

A clear, old, August memory of the rail clickities of trains in the distance, dimming light, coming sleep, open hot summer windows, yells of the older kids still up and about, green and young, and easy curtains revealing and curtailing what breeze there was. Backyard apple boughs and peach.

Those are the very trains I’d watch roar, sitting squat small boy on the side-track loading docks along the building’s south wall, weekends, Burlington, Ontario, when my father would take me to the factory to explore the great and grinding and loud and smelling-of-printing-inks-and-ketone machines as he did his foreman rounds.

Salt pills by the water fountain.

Half-ton rolls of paper you could smell when the machines heated them up.

Polish accents finding wee me a moment of joy relief in their labors of the day, and me, them, too.

And the fact that I’m old enough to have seen in-service *steam trains* go by at all. I didn’t imagine this, right? There is a dream-blur to boy-days and 69 years of times and days and daydreaming and stories told and heard and dreamt all mixed with others’ lives and their tells and mine.

I am most certainly and reliably a bit of an uncertain and unreliable witness to my very own life.

Click. *As a kid*

And, of course, exactly how uncertain and how unreliable is not for me to answer without duplicity, without, all at once, too much and too little at stake in the game of telling.

Clack. *I was just a kid.*

Single headlight seen at first, train-brightening with cycloptic dream-excitement, and then the great approach of noisy rhythmic chm-chm whooshes and that always-sudden moment of rush-by—with their great hinged armed elbows pushing the wheels and the plume of black, black, black smoke trailing up and over, having just pulled out of the Brant Street Station stop 4 miles west, working hard against inertia for a new head of steam. Part of this a black-and-white Max Fleisher stretched cartoon, full of animated and elongated Saturday-morning-jazz-ghosts.

And the Doppler pitch-drop whistle blows in the whiz-by. Factory sat at the Guelph Line level-crossing. Trains audible miles south, Delaware Avenue bedroom window, near enough to Lake Ontario that you could hear the fog horns some nights and see the sky redden from the slag dumps of the steel plants in Hamilton Harbour, formerly known as Burlington Bay.

### “One’s Story has been Stolen”

All this invokes, even in me, a least a bit of “So what?” As those involved in interpretive research and the long entrails of curriculum and place and our living relations to the work of teaching and learning as part of a life well-lived are finding more and more, *everybody* has had a life of some sort or other, *everybody* has a story or two or more, *everybody* hides and lies and distorts and exposes and blends and nurtures and taints, all in a jumble of intent and no intent at all. And this here story’s vague closeness and slight preciousness to me is not enough, by itself, for it to be *especially* worth the telling, let alone anyone else’s listening or reading, let alone worth even me remembering.

Interpretive work—hermeneutics and the curricula of place and relations and voice and story and life and earth and energy—summons a strange god:

When Hermes is at work ... one feels that one’s story has been stolen and turned into something else. The [person] tells his tale, and suddenly its plot has been transformed. He resists, as one would try to stop a thief.... “This is not what I meant at all, not at all.” But too late. Hermes has caught the tale, turned its feet around, made black into white, given it wings. And the tale is gone from the upperworld historical nexus in which it had begun and been subverted into an underground meaning. (Hillman, 1983, p. 31)

Such thievery can break the spell of the “compulsive fascination with my own case history” (Hillman, 2013, p. 30):

“The aim of interpretation, it could be said, is not just another interpretation but human freedom” (Smith, 1999, p. 29), hard-won and always in need of re-winning. And this is a freedom *from something* and a freedom, also, *on behalf of something*. It is a freedom from being “bound without a rope” (Loy, 2010, p. 42) to regnant ideas and beliefs, but it doesn’t proffer the simple negation of these ideas and beliefs but rather makes visible the causes and conditions of their arising. As goes an old hermeneutic saw, every text, every tale told, can be read as the answer to a question *that could have been answered differently* and therefore, every reading of every text is *possible*, not *necessary*, thus issuing a sort of relief from what appears to be intransigent, dominant confines. The hard-won insights that then arise will, of necessity, mean leaving certain things behind that will no longer support and encourage such precisely such freedom and alertness. It will mean looking foolish and starting all over again. The life-world is interpretable. But, too, my own most heartfelt “beliefs” and “feelings” and “opinions” and “experiences” become vulnerable to being read back to me in ways that I could not read them myself. This is true as much of the researcher as it is also true of the one who is the topic of one’s study. (Jardine, 2019b, p. 16)

But it is, therefore, vital to emphasize that, as a writer, *I am not Hermes*. I am not “the ‘god’ [*even*] of [*my*] own story” (Melnick 1997, p. 372, emphasis added) as per far too much of the contemporary self-noise. And this is true even (maybe even *especially*) of these silly stories of trains and summers and finches. Instead, I find myself *in these tales*, being told *by* them, not just telling them, out, somehow, in the wilds “beyond [*my*] wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxviii), told by birds and the weight of wood carried.

I find that I'm the tell of a tale. Of remembering this sweet thing that I first spotted, then cited 27 years ago (Jardine, 1992, p. vii). The lovely two-breath phrase by Rick Fields (1990, p. xiv):

My heart is broken  
Open.

It is strange to have a memory stretched back along a stretch of writing itself bent to "make memory last," a phrase that itself just now flitted by from nowhere. I went to look for it, as has become an old habit. To make sure it was still safe and sound. *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989), citing G. W. F Hegel. And hah! Look at this:

[Writing] can detach itself from the mere continuance of the vestiges of past life, remnants from which one human being can by inference piece out another's existence. [Writing] does not present us with only a stock of memorials and signs. [It, like many arts] has acquired its own contemporaneity with every present. To understand it does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said. (p. 391)

### **"As if Illuminated"**

*As a kid, I was just a kid.* Yes, it does sound like a Bill Callahan lyric. But there is another lyric. Bill Callahan (1999, recording as Smog), "Teenage Spaceship," from the CD *Knock Knock*. When I first heard this song, I sent it to an old friend with only this note: "I know *exactly* what this means."

Sometimes I need to recite a citation as a chance to breathe the breath of another life and then perhaps come back to myself with better means because of it. Oxygenated like water tumbled over rapid rocks and steepes.

Can I have these lyrics as my very own story, please? No, I can't even quote much of them without much hassle and expense (even though I can effortlessly do this: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llaeAbTSo\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llaeAbTSo_k)). This song perfectly tells an utterly intimate secret *about my very own life* that I had never before quite imagined having lived. And it does so precisely because of the decades and decades of distance now both collapsed and distended. It is profoundly nearby and only heard at a great murk of distance. The weird shock, not only of recognition, but of being suddenly and sharply and unexpectedly *recognized*:

We do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we already know. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition, what we know emerges, as if illuminated. It is known *as* something. (Gadamer 1989, p. 114)

Joy, yes, but not just joy:

I need to remember my stories not because I need to find out about myself but because I need to found myself in a story that I can hold to be mine. I also fear these stories because

through them I can be found out, ... exposed. Repression is built into each story as the fear of the story itself, the fear of the closeness of the Gods in the myths which found me. Thus the art of [interpretation] requires skilful handling of memory, of case history, so that it can truly found. (Hillman, 1983, p. 42)

I listen to this song. It illuminates me just right, just here, years outstretched, and it illuminates some swollen creek through trees, others huddled around, hovering at night, worlds and worlds of images and lives and stories told and heard. Halves of centuries utterly unbelievably in-between.

### “Like Archaic Storytellers”

“Telling my story” and speaking of “places” sometimes feels far too literal for my tastes. It is a bit too abrupt, a bit too asthmatic for me, too claustrophobic. Its closeness and closedness doesn’t feel like intimacy. “This is my story.” Huh. It sometimes feels like confinement rather than release.

My life isn’t *inside of me*. There are lakes and trains and spaceships and finches, wild and mint. And Hegel, too, and Bill Callahan. And each one of these is itself not just itself but an ardent world of relations. Radiant beings. Illuminated.

So, to cite these lyrics, these passages, to tell these funny little stories, is to relieve me of some confine of myself, even for just a while. It is to feel myself not just experiencing, but *experienced* from afar and then, bright headlight, suddenly brought near and whooshed by into the Doppler drop of sound memory, “less stuck in the case without a vision of its soul” (Hillman, 1983, p. 28).

Eyed by the Raven at the feeder, not just birdwatching.

It is to exhale and take a breath deep of summerair seaweed and Lake Carp and flushed goldfish now orangeflash lake monsters and Burlington boy-buckets of caught smelts swimming up Rambo Creek and brought home for the rose bushes.

Those trains and memory curtains, deep yellow sunset flickers through branches of Eva and Harry’s back yard trees late summer evenings. I was just a kid, picking mustard-colored rose-bugs from the peonies and doing terrible experiments in sealed jars. Life and death arced in my hands and in their squirms for escape.

And then this, written twenty years ago after my first return from Alberta back to Southern Ontario where I was raised:

How things smell, the racket of leaves turning on their stems, how my breath pulls this humid air, how birds songs combine, the familiar directions of sudden thundery winds, the rising insect drills of cicada tree buzzes that I remember so intimately, so immediately, that when they sound, it feels as if this place itself has remembered what I have forgotten, as if my own memory, my own raising, some of my own life, is stored up in these trees for safe keeping. Cicadas become archaic storytellers telling me, like all good storytellers, of the life I’d forgotten I’d lived, of deep, fleshy, familial relations that worm their ways out of my belly and breath into these soils, these smells, this air. And I’m left shocked that they know so much, that they remember so well, and that they can be so perfectly articulate. (Jardine, under consideration).

Autobiography porous like  
skin webbed in deep  
Earthwater pushripples.  
(Jardine, 1992, p. 40)

## Остранение

It was no thought or word that called culture into being, but a tool or a weapon. After the stone axe we needed song and story to remember innocence, to record effect—and so to describe the limits, to say what can be done without damage. (Berry, 1975/2019, p. 665)

It may be that the familiar only becomes visible and speakable in its truth once it is disrupted and, thereby, only once our sheer living in its embrace becomes sometimes-suddenly estranged in a rush-by of cold air under the wings of the everyday. The pop up causes a halt of breath—*aesthesis*—and can set off a nerve shot out of neurasthenic day-dragging. It is the smell of something feral run off into a life of its own. Energeia. Aliveness. Teenage Spaceship. I get it.

Now to follow this scent without betrayal or usurp or damage is the difficult, practical task of hermeneutics. In fact, part of this task is documenting precisely the lesson that the place teaches about such following. Seeing [*gnosis*] through [*dia*] the place is seeing the place for what it is, and not simply casting it in my own image wrought from living *in* that place. *Being in place* is not enough, and seeing through, diagnosis, is not a habitual recapitulation of the habitual, a droning, familiar repeating of the familiar, a levelling account of levelling. It is not just a meander through the old and the familiar, but a laying down of the nets and a leaving of one's family behind in order, ironically, to experience *these very matters* in proper proportion, beautifully.

In interpretive work, all this has been gathered under a phrase that, ironically, has become flat and all-too easy to toss off offhandedly: “making the familiar strange.” It originated as “defamiliarization,” *ostranenie* (Russian: *остранение*) in a 1917 essay by Viktor Shklovsky (1917/1965), “Art as Technique”:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists ... to make the stone *stony*. (p. 12)

So too with the art of interpretation. To recover the sensation of life over and against the neurasthenia of the day-to-day distraction, absorption, and exhaustion of living itself:

One of the threads of hermeneutic insight is that human consciousness tends towards a certain sleepiness and lethargy and who cares? and what difference does it make? regarding the ancestral currents that “bear us forward in their fine, accurate arms” (Wallace, 1989, p. 49). Lethargy, *Lethe*, forgetfulness, lethality. A certain “weakness” (Greek, *astheneia*) and heaviness and blandness and flatness and closure, where potentiality, possibility, interpretability, questioning, and venture, seem not only too exhausting to contemplate but, worse yet, simply uncalled-for in light of what moribundly “is.” [see Aho, 2018, Jardine, 2019a] It was Martin Heidegger (1962) who first gave contemporary hermeneutics hints of the numbing effects of what he called “idle talk,” (p. 211 ff.) “levelling down” (p. 127) and the stitched-up-mouths effects of the “it goes without saying” and “everybody knows” and

“that’s life” familiarities that come from the sways of the “they-self” (p. 163 ff.). (Jardine, 2019a, p. 45)

I take a different approach to the question of what truth, *aletheia*, or unconcealment, really means. I invoke the concept of *energeia* here, which has a special value because in dealing with it we are no longer moving in the realm of sentence truth. With this new conceptual word Aristotle was able to think a motion [a movement, motility, animation] ... something like life itself, like being aware, seeing, or thinking. All of these he called “pure *energeia*” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 213)

### The Hermeneutic Two-Step and then, The Leap

First, “something awakens our interest—that is really what comes first!” (Gadamer 2001, p. 50). I don’t stop. I get *stopped*, and this stop is “energizing,” “enlivening.” A finch in a wild mint vest flies by, and I corral it in words and then see what happens next. I quote the line and let it rest a while and see if it nestles, see if it starts to sing.

And there is no method, here, no secret, other than, with practice, cultivating a certain expectancy regarding the abundance of one’s living found, often, in its most mundane turns—a CD review, a lyric, an offhand comment or flit of memory, an old story re-told with just enough verve to perk and awaken and induce flight:

The whole leap depends on the slow pace at the beginning, like a long flat run before a broad jump. Anything that you want to move has to start where it is, in its stuckness. That involves erudition—probably too much erudition. One wants to get stuck in the history, the material, the knowledge, even relish it. I gobble everything up, and it gives me appetite to go on. I wouldn’t really know what I want to say ... until I’ve eaten a lot so that my writing is part of a digesting and spitting out what other people say and getting caught by the whole complete of it. Deliberately spending time in the old place. Then suddenly seeing through the old place. (Hillman, 1991, p. 154)

This first origin of hermeneutic work is life-bound, circumstantial, non-replicable happenstance. It is also a secret of the hermeneutic art of teaching, “to find that opening in each of us” (Wallace, 1989, p. 13), not by searching our persons, but by finding the open territories of the tale told that might allow each of us to open out into it and perhaps take flight a bit. Curriculum topics as living topographies, places, territories, full of energies and ways. An old idea.

Second, slowly starting to move *towards* this perking happenstance with an eye to taking it seriously and seeing where it might lead, what places it might inhabit and lead me towards. Where, if anywhere. Ground level animal sense. Grunt work. Waiting, asking around in anticipation. Interpretation fails when it becomes a self-involved, soaring flight up and away from its starts and startles.

Most often, things trail off, scents fail. Red herrings dragged across the path. “It would not deserve the interest we take in it if it did not have something to teach us that we could not know by ourselves” (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxxv), but knowing that it might thus be deserving is a *consequence of taking it seriously* as much as it is a *cause of taking it seriously*. This is the great, intimate, contradictory, and risky first dance of hermeneutic attentiveness. Feeling the grave,

detailed, livid resistance to the leap, expressing how fecund is the individual case that provides gravity to the tale being told.

Hence the risk. It might come to nothing. It might take flight. Insight might come, words might come or notes and melodies. It might, too, and just as easily, fly too high and burn up into ashes.

### Amazed at the Mazes of Years

So here we go again, recorded 20 years after “Teenage Spaceship”: Bill Callahan (2019b) “Young Icarus,” from the CD *Shepherd in a Sheepskin Vest* (Line 1–4) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owpqArysd-1>). Parallel lines and parallel lives.

Hovering at night.

I did gasp at this lyric, too, as it bypasses the all-too-familiar sun-soaring of the daytime comeuppance flight for which Icarus is well-known. Icarus flew all the time at night. A bit like a Teenage Spaceship, perhaps.

But that Icarus led a nightlife, out of sight of the sun that might tempt him too high, might tempt him to look away from the maze he was born into. This is an old reminder, a warning to those involved in the tough nails of interpretive work. An all-too-familiar life become strange, because now the too-well-known and too-well-worn, old Greek story of not aspiring too high has an unexpected howl and buzz in it: night flights, hovering, a teenage spaceship, peering downward, around, and all about. Amazed at the mazes of so many years, stitching graves, feeling dark wings nearby.

It might just be Ravens writing in mid-air.

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