

Before Water

Bob Perelman

University of Pennsylvania

The clear sentence the world ends
The clear sound the water made
Once the noise vocabulary
The sentence is an obstacle to noise
Ponderous forethought enables the sound to read its own mind
Clever of the world to rise crest fall white noise
Edit the end once again
Dries clear and won't give birth
Blue over once one more noise
Hear it say itself to what I see
Water before the sound until the sentence fills
I made the noise of its mind
The world end the sentence ends
On edge the water thought touching noise
Once again the sentence ends
One sense to a vocabulary
Line up in order of birth
Each time of course the sentence completes
I make the noise of vocabulary
After it was a sentence it's a sound
Water roll sense make blue
Do one to the end
The clear blue birth of green
Touching itself the sentence learns its loop
Learning will make the noise edge
The end makes birth once
Blue course no noise in this sentence
No noise in this sentence
The sentence goes over itself
Gave a loop to clear dried water
Ponderous water the end of noise
Leaning over each death edge complete
The world enables the water to end



Blue and noise at each edge of the sound
 The sense against the water
 The sentence ends when made
 The noise rolls when the water's ready
 While it's before through to when I hear it
 Vocabulary enables forethought to end
 Roll over watery noise the sentence says to
 The clear noise the sentence makes
 Blue water at the sense's edge
 This sentence learned to roll over
 At the end of sense there is no death
 Each time the end says itself
 Noise makes sense at every edge
 It's up to blue to say
 The vocabulary learns to lean
 Each vocabulary contains its own blue
 The clearer the world the nearer the edge
 I make my sense to the end
 Green water learns to dry
 Each edge of the water
 Every once it's over
 To the edge to the end no noise of forethought occurs after the
 mind falls
 To the end of noise the mind occurs once falls water
 I touch the water's clever sense
 I only think of this each time
 The sentence starts to contain water and spills
 Touching the end with the edge of the loop
 This water was once a sentence
 White water touching blue water
 Once I sense the end it's a loop
 Green appears where it says blue
 Each sentence is complete
 Each sentence is the same
 The same sounds give birth to the same sentence nearer the end
 I make the water dry
 Each noise the water makes ends
 Each sentence completes the world
 Sound ties thought to itself
 The thought of the death of thought gives mind its edge
 Every sentence is water
 The shape of water in each one is the same once it's over
 Clear thought nearly noise
 The sentence made clever death noise

Blue makes sense once in the vocabulary
 Watery noise over the water
 The world makes sense once a sentence
 Water is made of thought
 The clear completed sentence the world is blue
 Sense leans nearer over sentence noise
 Forethought comes to the edge and spills
 This time it's water that's complete
 A loop makes no noise of the completed edge
 Water makes blue make white
 I made each time line up in order
 Extending the thought enables birth to end
 I read my own blue
 A loop around was or will be
 I hear noise make sense near the end
 The end of the noise the edge of the sentence
 Each ponderous birth of vocabulary rolls in
 Do it once
 Does this noise completely end the world
 The senses fall to white noise loops
 The sentence is a line of water in order to read my mind through once
 The sentence in a noise of falling order green extent
 Once it's done the world dries
 I made death green only to think
 The world is made of sentences
 Once again the noise ends with time made blue
 White time lines the sense with noise
 There was no vocabulary in the water
 Every once the time rolls in vocabulary
 Once I edit sense I end
 This sentence gives the vocabulary I sense birth
 Noise against blue death no noise
 The water rises in the middle to end the sentence
 I learned to read before I heard a sound
 Each sentence makes the same sound
 This sound ends this loop
 See it say water
 No noise enables sense to end the world
 The noise of it, water of it
 No time until the end rises white
 The sentence makes dry sound
 The clear blue sea is just noise
 The edge contains the noise of the edge
 Water is made of noise

Once each loop the noise turns clear
 I made a sound, it made a noise
 It goes and went dry
 Each sentence completes the thought that tells it where to start
 I start the sea
 Once a sound occurs it's over
 The water is lined with dry noise
 I is a sound that occurs again and again to the same water
 Green once again
 Before I end thought I end
 The sentence makes itself
 Forethought touches water before water extends the sense
 What's the sense of thinking every thought
 I say to see the water
 Vocabulary lines up each time
 I never think I'm the same as thought
 Time is lined up noise
 Blue of lined green makes sense
 Blue is complete sense
 The noise of thought occurs to make thought ponderous
 Noise is the same difference as water and thought
 Every sense each time
 Water says to thought, water
 Loop the time against death
 The middle of the sentence never ends
 The middle of the same noise makes a different sense
 The world on edge rolls its own water
 I'm here to make noise make sense
 I will only sense completed time once
 Think and the sense is made
 Each one in every sense
 I am made of one birth
 The end and the edge of the water
 Blue makes its sound sound blue
 Once it's a sentence it's never the same
 The shape of the sentence is clear beyond the water
 It is the end of itself
 The water read my mind before my birth
 Roll the sentence over the edge
 A sentence says the world and ties the water to green blue and white noise
 This loop over this loop
 Toward water while in the sentence
 The clear sound the clear water
 Green for mind, water for noise

Where to leave the water's edge
 See the same thing make the sound go away
 Blue lines in
 Noise makes me think
 See the water over again
 Once thought ends, green starts
 Water to the edge of each sentence
 The world learns to end
 Blue lean green sound
 There is no water there
 White says itself
 Do I learn sound
 See against sentences
 The mind okays the noise, the water pushes the mind away
 Sentences are shape, the world is end
 White spill vocabulary no world
 I same I think water I water
 Thought extends throughout the sentence
 Blue start up edge over makes this sound a noise away
 A full sentence complete with water
 I go from my birth to water to sound
 I learn the complete water
 Blue each time or green every same time
 I'm the same water as I think
 A sound vocabulary contains spills
 Water in blue noise
 Nowhere in the sentence is there a separate noise for water
 Is it or isn't it what it says
 The same thought the same time as the same thing
 Sentence says so sound may go
 Loose blue water or I thought it
 I'm a shape I shape
 There is more thought than time, more water than vocabulary
 Thought is clear and clearly not water
 Each edge marks where two senses end
 No time before this thought to think it
 Through sound into the blue water over sound
 The noise of the time before
 By the middle of the sound the sentence was here
 Water in the same sense as a broken line of noise never ends
 The world ends what I think extends beyond the sentence
 Only one time and go
 I hear the end once noise completely falls away
 Blue starts with no time

Water falls learning to be noise
Born blue on the only edge
Never once or here again
The shape of the sound is the same as mind touching water
Noise touching the sentence to pound it to water
The end is one edge
Now the world starts completely over
See blue say noise
I dry to clear sound
The thought the noise makes clear
Mind or water in order
The sentence ties a line around the water's complete shape
Water is open
Once death it's blue
No because of noise
Fall sense clever extension end never again water's made
My mind's made up
I hear water spill beyond its sound
One sentence makes the world
In here it's there out here
One and think again to say it
Send the sound to the end of the line
More time each time
I shape the loop with vocabulary that enables noise to crest
The white line never stays white
Think one of the sounds
Each is the same as the edge and disappears
I say blue I see blue
Sound on edge makes the sentence see itself
I hear the sound while it's over
Nowhere until it appears
A noise says to hear
Blue and again it's water
Looped noise vocabulary more than noise can learn to see
I hear I say inside sound
Touch before and water after
It's the end that makes birth violent
Thought as sound of itself
This sentence says it says itself once
The noise learns to be water in time to roll white words into the sentence
Water makes noise and sound made water appear
Vocabulary was always the same as noise
As I say until never so
Once it was there and now it's never a sound outside

The world was always its only edge
 The sentence stands in the middle of the water
 The color of the water the sound of the sentence
 Each shape starts all over itself
 Blue nowhere outside of noise
 Green at the same time it's said
 I touch each sentence to the thought of what I hear
 The blue line means water, the noise means blue
 This sentence is full up
 Death gives blue noise out there
 The water starts to rise
 A sound of it
 Blue
 Ponderous completely filled in thought ends before
 Wrinkled water behaves itself
 The edge includes what it leaves out
 Each crest comes to the same thing
 I read green as sound
 The sound of water ends at once
 Once I'm here I see lines
 Noises think the same thing
 Mind thought the noise mind
 Even where it happens it ends
 Once in and gone
 Water extends blue across the looped noise
 Sound clear through thought of water
 Inside sounds the outside stands clear
 I see uncovered blue as a noise of the line
 A sentence across the end of all it can think
 One sentence to the edge of green without more green
 Sense is a loop of sense once it's thought
 End spills dry to here or noise
 Another white and the same white
 The edge rolls itself away
 A different sentence goes across the sentence
 The water completes the sound
 It's gone between the sound and where it is
 A noise clear through to itself
 The completed spill
 Time goes as ready sense
 In a falling crest I say the middle of the water
 More than I can think in ready noise
 Once and only again not
 Ready to time the water's edge

Sound leaves out things to sense
 World in the same sense as this sentence
 Against itself water disappears
 Every end made over
 The noise death birth makes no noise to end water
 White loops
 Ready the same as each separate noise
 Went in
 All once tied around
 Loops each noise against the mind I see in
 Complete thought includes a separate vocabulary for each sound
 All the water spilled in one sentence
 No more than noise with an edge
 A completed sentence draws a line around noise at the end
 A separate spill for each thing learned
 See or think clear dry blue
 Edge so clear once the middle's water
 Touched no other than the same thing
 Gone before again
 Water coming in once I shape what it says
 The same things complete a different world
 Green and blue or see into it
 Time a variation of one
 Time before the end of the sentence to say
 Each noise enables itself to go away
 It's over to have a shape
 Thought against vocabulary against sense through to the end
 I learned to end before forethought touched me here
 World against itself as water
 The sentence goes to here
 A clear sound invites thought
 I can only hear the same sound once
 Once started all shape can do is loop its edge without end
 A green thought against the completed world
 All sentences start from here
 Sound all over and clear to here
 To clear vocabulary from what I see
 The point of sound is beyond thought and loops back in completely
 Extend vocabulary to start before complete water
 I as a noise it can think
 The world disappears as the edge never ends
 I make the sound to learn the end
 The sea is nearly never ready to contain water
 As the thing sounds I read the same thought

I think this through or the water stays
 Each complete sentence says time will end
 I see it as it falls away
 Noisy water again
 One is a loop
 A complete sentence invites the world to be outside
 No sound inside shape
 I read my mind
 Water said to be water once
 I extend the line between water and its shape
 Thought has no choice between water and thought
 The world occurs against what the sense of it enables the sentence to say
 I fall is the edge
 A sentence is here and over
 No blue, no green, no water, itself complete
 A separated noise clears the way to blue
 A sentence threw all the water away
 Say it through it
 Clever noise across the clear world
 Once a noise is a thought it's all I hear
 It took here to think more sound
 See blue where blue was
 Think once in and edge
 Tied itself across what was said
 Goes dry extends to water
 I think a sentence while it starts
 Blue water makes a noise in green water
 Inside the uncovered sounds
 Leave the water at birth
 Edge to sense noise around itself
 I see it until it's water
 Once in a line in order ponderous noise to nowhere before
 I can't think again
 Tell the water where to start
 To make sense the middle disappears
 One separate from itself nowhere but here
 I see around the sound
 Sense makes noise ready to make sense
 The thought was uncovered by the end of the sentence
 I'll hear this noise end
 Sound in the same sense as birth makes noise
 In it to say again one
 The sentence goes back to where it came from
 Green through itself

The noise varied itself to make me hear the same thing it said
 Time once established goes away
 Such shape as the sentence takes away from the world
 Touch sense to water
 The end is over against each sentence
 The water rolls as before water
 Once it happens to sound outside all time
 The water sounds okay
 The noise crosses the sentence
 I'm ready to see
 It's water again

AFTERWORD

The Cantos is more than 800 pages; “A,” if you count the Index (and you really should) is a bit longer: 826. “Before Water,” in its original publication (7 *Works*, 1978), is 14 pages. It took Pound and Zukofsky half a century to write their poems; I wrote “Before Water” in about two weeks. A little over 400 lines (I’ve never counted accurately), it’s shorter than *The Waste Land*. So by real long-poem standards, “Before Water” barely qualifies: but I guess the nose of the camel is now under the tent.

Originally, the poem was the textual half of a collaboration by me and my wife, painter Francie Shaw. One evening in 1977 we did two performance pieces at a local San Francisco gallery, Eighty Langton Street (now called Langton Arts). “Before Water” was the second piece.

In 2009, in volume 8 of the *Grand Piano* project (ten Language writers each writing ten pieces that dealt with the early years of the Bay Area Language scene), I wrote a prose-poetry hybrid addressing that evening. Below is a shortened version of that piece. It starts quite eclectically—oceanic speculations; R. Crumb; the Giant Camera at Lands’ End in San Francisco—before focusing on “Before Water.”



Different routes to the ocean. Big as it is, you might think you could meander in any direction and be standing there, the sublime horizontal communicating icy thrills direct to feet and legs, but no.

The ocean is not available to the senses
 You can't see it
 You can say you do
 You can look

But no. No ocean. Inland chaos of arbitrary routes the other way, all of them long. “You can’t remember this stuff,” sage advice spoken by R. Crumb on film (*Crumb*) as he’s getting driven

around photographing one anonymous gas-station-infested corner after another, then using the photographs to draw page after page of urban wastage, each page—billboards, streetlights, sets of phone and power wires—a little different, but each filling the eye with dead work, thick wires sagging, cars moving or parked, junked, their moments of shiny ostentation now bulgy cartoon blotches not going anywhere.

Write what you never saw
Then see exactly that
Novelty acts for live ears
O god he's brought the ocean

Picture the whole thing. “You can't see it. You have to see a picture.” Where can you see such a picture? The Giant Camera behind the Cliff House at Lands End. Francie took me. She was in charge of the visual. It was a small white building, stucco box with a knob or two stuck on to suggest a camera. Camera obscura—never heard of it. Obscura? Oscura? A twilight camera? No. Camera as in room. (Italian: darkened room.) (So the Giant Camera was neither giant nor a camera.) But I didn't know that then and was astonished to enter this small cubic building (\$3.00?) and once inside in the bottom half of the dark to see the dish of concentrated color, not a painting, not a photograph or film, but a relay from outside, alive, with the motion not immediately apparent, because often it was only tiny bits of the picture that might be moving, when I could make myself recognize that it wasn't some very accurate floor painting of the ocean I was seeing, but a concentration of what was actually visible outside, the same light, same proportions, the exact colors, more exact in being concentrated.

The Giant Camera was a big pinhole camera. There was a small opening on the roof with a little rotating periscope sticking out which cast an exact (upside-down) circular image down on a big white saucer inside.

Looking up “Camera Obscura” online I read that Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen, 965–1039 C.E., scientist, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher from Basra) is credited with first elucidating the principles, but as he says, *Et nos non inventimus ita*: “we did not invent this.” Back in 1977 I had never heard of personal computers but was serious about my electric typewriter, which, as I remember, is what I used to write “Before Water.” I remember a small accumulation of typed pages. Single space? Quite possible.

No literary lawyer will be able
to pin down the invention of any technique
Names, place, initial publication, the very paper
This living hand, typing. See, I

Light through a hole painting a picture, a public mural (inside) (\$3.00) ancient contemporary, Pompeii moving.

See, I

Concentrated color in the dish, pure art, exquisite because purely mechanical, but free from gravity, though the small inverted image showed gravity out there, those two making their way down the wet beach with the fog beginning to coalesce, the images one tenth life-size, one fiftieth? small living rectangles.

And if light is substance in any sense then it's the same substance touching both inside and outside with the same shapes at the same time. Object, subject, *menage à deux*. Art, inexhaustibly fresh but full of the slowest transitions: after all, no one invented the eye.

Now I look
Then I had never heard
If memory is to be believed
Close your eyes and take the picture

It was like seeing the retina, except a retina made of cement, a concave depression eight feet across, painted white to catch the scene outside, except there was no inside or outside since what was seen was the present, or put it we were seeing seeing: Seal Rock, seals sleeping, or clambering blubbily about, waves reaching up to whip seaweed growing on the rock tips, but as the periscope on the roof rotated and thus the scene rotated, slowly there would be wet beach, and above that a street, cars moving and parked.

Francie had a movie camera which she brought to the beach, a few hundred yards down the beach from the Giant Camera. It might have been a different time from our one visit there. My memory keeps connecting that concerted dish and her filming sequences of waves, Super 8, gathering lines, white on grey, as material, abstracting crashing white lines erased by grey masses of salt water lifting against the beach, grey filmed light splashing on grainy white screen, but she doesn't remember such a connection.

In "Before Water," Francie's movie of the ocean (fixed camera, long shots) set the agenda. It struck me as utterly simple and, in a low-key way, heroic, watching the sublime yield line after line. The formal constraint for me became to say the same thing (more or less) (variety a minor stipulation) forever.

In the performance Francie had me project the wave movie onto a long roll of paper that hung on the wall while I read the poem. She had prepared parts of the paper with light washes of blue and green and some wave lines so it wasn't just white that the movie was projected on. At times she would gesture for me to pause the projector so she could trace the specific wave line in the now-stilled movie with a thick ink brush. (I never paused the reading.) Other times she wouldn't ask for the movie to be stopped and just drew as the filmed wave kept moving. She kept pulling the roll of paper down as she worked so that it piled onto the floor in bunchy waves between the wall and the audience. It was very much a pragmatic homage to the state of the material world and a powerful meditation on occurrence and recurrence. But at the same time it was an orchestrated clash of media, temporalities, looks, and residues. Wholeness was not the name of the game. The projector clacked away, turning its little rectangular frames into ocean waves; when I stopped the projector, freezing the wave, the motion of her brush copying the wave line onto the paper kept the motion of the present alive and visible (as did the ink dripping down the paper); when she let the movie run and brushed (impossibly) after a moving wave, the stillness of the resulting thick ink line was a small stark memorial to the vanishing wave. Not to forget the stilled drips.

Writing the piece didn't make my life pass before my eyes, because then I had very little sense of my life as a sequence, but it did push me into some posthumous/prebirth perspective that also had everything to do with the sentence. My big simple thought was: sentence = wave. I remember intoning a little solemnly on Lyn Hejinian's and Kit Robinson's radio show at KPFA

back then that “a sentence is the same thing as a life” or “a sentence beginning and ending is the same thing as the universe beginning and ending.” Posthumous and prebirth applied to sentences as well, so tenses could be tied into any bows I could manage: e.g., While it’s before through to when I hear it.

The simple and preposterous koan that Francie’s movie/painting had set me, to imitate the ocean, simultaneously taxed my invention and dismissed it. I mean, I could write the same thing again, more or less, anything counted as a variation. I would be accompanied by big ideas, cloud shapes I could observe for various patches of lines as I bobbed in my coracle: sentences, being born, what’s the difference between sound and vocabulary? between vocabulary and a life? between a color and its name? reading and mind reading? senses making sense prior to vocabulary and the sentence making sense after its completion/disappearance?

One idea was to repeat as long as I could (I had to match the length of the movie, and, as I’ve said, ended up writing something above four hundred lines), but the other idea was not to repeat exactly. I tried to keep track of the phrasal specifics while I was writing, but after a few hundred lines, rereading for accidental samenesses lost what little charm it had ever had. [A]

[memory supplied in many cases by Francie Shaw]