Before Water

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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 (upsidedown) 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 stillled 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 vocabu-
lary 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.

[memory supplied in many cases by Francie Shaw]