ON CLAY AND WRITING
Does clay have a throbbing vein?
— Bhanu Kapil

In Krzysztof Kieślowski’s film Trois Couleurs: Rouge, a man named Auguste sees his ex-lover at dinner with another man and hides from her subsequent pursuit of him across the street. As the camera pans downward from her shouting form, we see Auguste holding his breath underneath her, vein throbbing.

To translate this cinematic pan onto paper, we must arrest that throb into stills, a Muybridgean scroll of images showing the rise and fall of a small shadow against Auguste’s neck. To translate it into writing, something else must happen. A play-by-play description — *holding his breath, underneath her, vein throbbing* — like this scroll of images, morphs the affective resonance of the cinematic shot. We, as readers, must imagine what the words describe, closing the circuit between writing and movement, language and image. How does one write the poetry of a throbbing vein? Or put another way, can one write Auguste’s pulse so the reader can feel it? See every beat of blood in his heightened sense of alert?
Imagine the beat of a line of poetry like its bloodline. Traditionally, the academy teaches students how to analyze rhythm through scansion—a system that wrings information from writing like a wet towel. Except here, what pours off the page registers in sound and rhythm, stressing the way we read—the way we sound. Institutionally, a normalized and recognizable pattern has feet and is mapped by dashes and accent marks. Think *iambic pentameter*. Think “free” verse.

What happens when tracking syllabic beats—when trying to find a pattern to hold onto—offers no smart-sounding name to contain or label it—any attempt at definition, in fact, falling, in suspension, away from the form, no repetition to hold onto? No pattern to pin down and discipline writing in a tidy line? Dactyls and spondees slip under the smooth dark surface of a different sea. Then, the surface of the body writing. It’s funny how often I’ve heard co-workers and acquaintances wonder, aloud: “If it doesn’t rhyme, what makes it poetry?” What then, does poetry even mean?

I cannot begin to explore an idea or feeling without coming, again and again, to this question that, on so many levels, is unanswerable. Because simply saying “poetry is alchemical” doesn’t help anyone feel better about the whole thing. Instead, my academically trained mind reaches to place the word next to others to find its meaning. The poetry of furniture. The poetry of a meadow overflowing with wildflowers. The poetry of your body, eyes watching the poetry of another bending over to touch your skin. What makes a *thing* poetic? If we can answer this question, we might be able to come closer to how poetry leans.

In *Rouge*, I thought I found it. That pulse in the neck of the ex-lover standing under the feet of the one that seeks him. How do I talk about it? What makes this, more than the lighting, the color, the feeling of the scene, what I call poetic?
Years ago, I wanted to write a text with a hatchet buried under the floorboards. This, I thought, was poetry. But I wondered, can the hatchet just sit—not a beating heart, mind you, or a body—with the reader standing or reclining above it, unaware? Or does it need marking, a thump or loose floorboard, signs of struggle, a latched cellar door? Must the floor beat? Can the hatchet remain completely unknown?

Nervous, I unlatch the cellar door. I fling it open to allow a harsh light to fall on the page, exposing the understory. I peer down.

This time, I find a room filled with clay.

I descend into the basement. Like many basements in Atlanta, some of the walls are made of concrete slabs, while others—where the house meets the rolling hillsides called, in this part of the country, piedmont—are raw exposed red clay. The basement of this writing intersects with clay in a similar way—dirt meeting a body willing to descend—in a messy type of exposure. Not an exposure like a body facing an approaching hurricane or side-eye, not like an exposure that abets state violence and control, but a subcutaneous one. The space between writing and clay is the space between our self and our body: thoughts and muscle, feelings and bone. I press a hand into the clay wall, its moist cool weight pressing back.

The power of that weight pressing back.

I pull a piece from the wall and begin to open it, then continue to fold. Open, fold, open, fold. Ridges form and sagging lines. Fingerprints leave marks like tiny topographies. Suddenly, I press the clay back into the wall, firmly, with intent. The object disappears—but not fully, the trace of my fingers along its surface, the thin layer against the wall, the warmth of worked clay against the cool of the underground slope. What I didn’t intend
a roughness, like any other.
a roughness like any other.
SCHRÄGER, VERSEITZTER UND FIGURIERTER RIPS.
lies open in the way the bit of clay stares back, transformed yet still itself. I may have wanted to put it there, but its form is its own: it became what it wanted to be.

It’s important to note that clay is never just a metaphor. Instead, impression holds the archive of the event, housing an index of ceramic imprint. A plastic give. Not to perfect some religious or allegorical proportionality, nor to evoke a culturally and historically specified beauty, the clay lengthens and extends beyond itself in an act that can be considered aggressive. A finger penetrates the surface to find more clay, its whorls a moist discourse we might read as if tea leaves at the end of an overdrawn and histrionic conversation.

This can be any tone, immersion an act unfamiliar regardless of its frequency. It might be enough to contour, but to depict with the intensity of locating and withholding against a contemporaneous embrace is something else entirely. Subtlety resides in friction, a long walk along the periphery. The form can easily detect nonchalance; like any substance accustomed to sitting along the edge of a basement corridor.

We can begin to think of syntax as a type of plasticity: clay-like in its tendency to mold and direct the line—a firm pressure point. Halts and starts, striations of the palm, encode a textural map whose key remains obscured. We might need a manual like Franz Donat’s *Dictionnaire des Liages*—pages of gridded impact. To look at this texture, here, and proffer its semantic conclusion. Like tonal surfaces, shifts in hue register in another sector of the body—a getting caught, or the trap door feeling, an elision making the ground disappear.

In another angle of approach, the sentence becomes a queer body on a slab. Wires and nodes attempting a body scan. When we know more effective modes of acquisition: a walk in a gar-
den; deep breathing; not a resistance to analysis but allowing for some type of mystical element. A striation—smooth muscle—easier to ignore, and the queer body itself that which we mold in and out of preconceived images and representations.

Take, for example, the comma that not only differentiates on a planar surface but correlative supplies a quick chance to breathe, to re-collect oneself: a pivot point. As Bhanu Kapil writes:

Syntax has the capacity to be subversive, to be very beautiful, to register an anti-colonial position: in this respect. I think of the semi-colon: how it faces backwards and is hooked, the very thing a content [shredded plastic] might be caught on. A content, that is, that might never appear in the document of place. Perhaps the poet’s novel is a form that, in this sense, might be taken up [is] by writers of color, queer writers, writers who are thinking about the body in these other ways.³

Our comma, if excised, might be disregarded, claiming it makes no semantic variance, and yet, the lack of the hook, its twist, may cause any type of echoic forces with real consequences. Just as finalizing a ceramic sculpture with a fine-toothed comb, the glaze filling in crevice and ridge provide a sensory specificity. One that may remind the body of a lost memory, a conduit for materialization.

Particulate cements together in absentia of larger bodies. In effect, one major seam cutting through these strata is the notion of coming to the page as empty. Rather, we can see, like clay, that language is not formless until we bring our tactile tendencies to mold, draw, and assemble. Consider Levi R. Bryant’s viewpoint:

The problem is that clay is not formless. In fact, clay has quite an exquisite and determinate form at the molecular level. In-
deed, it even has form at the molar level as a heap of clay. It’s just not the form that we would like it to have. What takes place between the wooden form and the clay is not an imposition of form on the formless, but an encounter between structured matters that generates a new structure as a result of the interplay of both of the matters interacting with one another. It is not an “active principle” (form) being imposed on a “passive principle” (matter) from without. Rather, both matters are structured, and both matters are simultaneously active and passive in relation to one another.\textsuperscript{4}

We can say the same of language— in discreet parts, always structured, simultaneously active and passive—whose structure we inherit, predating us. It is no coincidence that multiple cultures have clay as the forming matter of the human body. Primal, we cover ourselves, whose transparent relative is language, and in writing, we bend in order to revitalize that arc.

Of course, we enforce a formal quality through a durational function. And yet, substance has a history, whether mathematical or molar, in temperature, hue, and context, before we arrive and cause a ruckus. Think of clefts and dens. Think of torn moss and quiet hooves. Movement has a vector, structured by position; the chiasmus holds as long as the gaze is returned—annulment no option when negative space incurs a type of solidity enacted by intense tension, tiny tools, broken wood. In such work, any fluctuation or turn of the head ruins a perfect angle, a smudged triangle of three distinct points:

A – Bring the tool to bear on the line: it severs, recombines, leaving a streak. Enough attention—a swarm of memories or conflicting emotions—can attenuate to the point of collapse. Emergent, a musical break. Typed and slow. Waiting, its own cohesive form in the thickness of silent resilience. It says, hold. Stand back and hurl it against the wall. Observe the wet stain it leaves as it slides to the floor.
B – Bring the wall to bear on the line: crushing certain phrases may make a claim for increased clarity, church windows molten and finally transparent. What can it tell you about more opaque situations, where goals are aligned more with the space within vessels than the cloths that buff them? A nick of a fingernail, a divot, our race and gender, our sexual desires begin a narrative the clay may hold or slough off in due time. Arc, it all arcs, in bare light or darkness, but to mold oneself an imago —

C – Bring the imago to bear on the line: clay is like language in the way it haptically transmits proximate registers. The hatchet we all carry, bury in mud, under intricately tiled floors, behind woodwork, beside heaps of nails and plastic sheets. See a silhouette slowly rise: an act and an event.

And the vein? A thin lode of crushed glass, as a reverberation of your arm lightning striking into sand.
Endnotes

1 Bhanu Kapil, personal correspondence, 2013.
2 Krzysztof Kieślowski, *Trois Couleurs: Rouge* (The Criterion Collection, 1994), DVD.