Part VI

TRANSITIONING
ANGELS

Rolf Hughes constructs an ‘angelology’ of language through the transformative invocations of prose poetry, summoning fourteen angels and six (non)definitions of circus, as part of the transition from life to death.

Every visible thing in this world is put in the charge of an angel. (Chase 2002, 14)
Preface

‘I tell you that they have reinvented microbes
in order to impose a new idea of god.’

— Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done with the Judgement of God*

As above, so below;
sun cleft
bitter slope
black coal
drum burst
rhythm
red sun
black horse
dawn crag
blacksmith
six horseshoes
tossed across
earth & wood
wind & bone
earth & bone
iron & blood
fire & ash
and, finally,
a petal or two
— ready for you.
As this world is not fully formed, we have only a small idea of its scope.

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1. On the futility of defining angels

The angel is concerned with transforming the world into magnificence. It transcends the narrow and the obscure, yet inhabits paradox, being both disembodied and integrated into the core of our being.

This means the angel is a manifestation of inner oscillation. Oscillation opens up the world. It is the basis of the dissemination of light.

The angel seeks only to sustain a gaze on each form of existence — this alone keeps it in a state of grace.

The angel lies down with the leper, shares the heat of its heart, yet looks aside when life leaks away. Challenged, it resorts to a language of falling.

*I fall by means of candlelight
I fall in thrumming yards
I fall in brackish waters
I fall on open hearts.*

If you dissect an angel, you will find no rules that can be transcribed; you will discover, instead, that the purest laws are now made manifest on your bloodied hands.

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2. The breath before liquid life

breeze
whispering world
opaque, glimmering, crepuscular thoughts

mirror mist, sunbeam
deep green tides
city of coral
fragments waving
grey scaffold
shells, sponge
seaweed
populations of polyps
secret affinities
twilight

It's not about you, she says.

It is about we.

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First definition of circus

Think of the circus as a watering place, a wellspring.

A ghost walk on which doors appear closed without being so. Walls revealed to yield at sprung rhythms.

A rite de passage where the sick and the afflicted confront the potentialities of their recovery.

A dream house made of canvas and wax.


Now raise your right hoof.
Feel the equilibrium about to be cleaved by your coming stumbling into this world.

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3. A dialogue of clowns

Here comes mischief!

[LAUGHTER]

Horizontal Capitano versus Vertical Servetta!
Dialoguing about the afterlife!
[LAUGHTER]
Red-faced, white-faced mischief!
Sssh, listen!

The door is locked.
The key elsewhere.
There’s a stone in my shoe.

Fetch it, he says.
The key, fetch it!
Hobble, hobble…
What about me blister, mister?
Just fetch it!
The afterlife awaits!

Forget it, is what I said.
Forget about me fetching it.
The key is elsewhere
The door remains locked.
Plus, there’s a stone in my shoe
Didn’t you hear?
[Turns to face audience].
I got a bleedin’ blister!

[LAUGHTER]

The afterlife? The after this life?
[PAUSE]
Don’t make me laugh!

[UPROARIOUS LAUGHTER. EXEUNT TO TRUMPET SERANADE]

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4. What but a soul?

What but a soul could have the wit
To build me up for sin so fit?
So architects do square and hew
Green trees that in the forest grew.

— Andrew Marvell, ‘A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body’

Let me suggest you climb a tree and cut.
The branches will take your weight and bounce you gently, sensually.

So let me suggest you now cut some more.
Relish your suspension between earth and sky —
your soul snarling in the saw’s hungry maw,
your skeleton bolted together in its sack.

Lay your head where my heart used to be
Hold the earth above me
Lay down in the green grass
Remember when you loved me

Nerves, arteries, veins. Arboreal chain. All in vain.

Stand in the shade of me
Things are now made of me.¹

Cut.
Me.
Down!

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Second definition of circus

Circus is built upon materials singularly resistant to the instruments of human control. Spade, drill, truncheon, club. It is not uncommon for stepladders to plunge thirty metres into aerial emptiness.

When I am in that darkness, I know nothing of anything human.

I do remember that previous darkness in which I see everything (and then nothing), that darkness that comes from within and that so delights me that I cannot speak of it.

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5. Proto life incantation

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons even death may die.

— H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Nameless City’, January 1921

They appear, these malaks, angels, or jinn, as if in a clouded mirror, by the loosed ones tempestuously, storming successively, the scatterers scattering, several severing, hurling the remaining to bond or repel; by those that out plug violently, or draw out gently; by those that float serenely, those that outstrip suddenly; by those that enter a flat mirror world, averse to perspective and all the errors of your penetrating gaze. The lake of fire descends, you abandon your neutrality; we loiter with intent, eventually peering up through our three eyes for
the judgement of the cap that fits with a snap and extinguishes all light.

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Third definition of circus

The standing limb/the falling limb: a choreography of (dis)equilibrium.

No, lift not that leg without lowering an arm, turning your head, or arching your back; every movement solicits a compensatory movement. By such means do we safeguard the asymmetrical trust and respect that sustains the collective.

Once set in motion, we learn an art of decisions, summoning all that is outside expression to illuminate our current embodied geographies of flotsam and flow, this being another aspect to a practice of oscillation.

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6. On naming the membrane

Through the spoken Word we receive fire and light, by which we are made new and different, and by which a new judgment, new sensations, new drives arise in us.

— Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians

In the beginning, before life, there were words; possessed of propulsion, rebounding, but not yet accountable; they occupied the blank spots hitherto reserved for the divine; they endowed life with a language of life,
For a thought to become circus, it must expose a higher degree of *inner oscillation* than the surrounding materials, movements, spaces, artefacts. This oscillation is found between the *abject* and the *transcendental*, between *chance* and *the sublime*. For every fall, a potential hook.

I understand now, imagining to myself the momentum of the fall, that nothing exists in the world without meeting a hook. (Bataille 1977, 42)

It is why the circus artist is the one whose greatest achievements are all located *outside* the body, under conditions that can never be repeated, knitting together as they do realms such as fall, hook, flesh, and dust, law, and light, these being tricks that not only create the illusion of ‘saving’ us, but halt, momentarily, our slide offstage.

7. *Carnival of the undefinable*

The angel is drawn to certain sites. An ocean harbouring ingrown volcanoes once known as the island’s multiple eyes, but today hollowed and lacklustre (occasionally, in their manifold furrows, the angel may glimpse flashes of defiance). A robust cage lowered into the saltwater lagoon, mounds of swollen flesh slowly rippling, then parting as sunken eyes survey their new home. The angel will toss live rabbits and hens which are shredded in seconds, gobbling guts and bones alike, sending showers of sparks from the iron bars.
Such sites provide excellent opportunities for trapping unwary jinns.

To have unloosed the angel’s soft skin, pressed my lips to its heat until rising delight subsides in sighs, served choice meats from calfskin platters, hands encased in the finest, blood-mottled gloves — all this counts for nothing in the inferno of fury to which an ensnared angel invariably brings itself.

And so we wait, malak clinging to a rock gnawed by the ocean, drawing light and energy landscapes, folding a trick back into itself, a perfectly purposeful accident, a ring dropped into a lagoon to summon crustaceans to the marriage of sea and land.

Yes, here they come — white-lipped barnacles, sucking on effervescent salt blooms, forming water islands, liquid naming rituals, subjecting the metaphors of the machine to saline jaws until they rust-crumble, diffusing orange cloud-showers of iron nutrients, the back end of something becoming the front end of something else — Cambrian explosion — origin of life, farting pantomime horse, masked stranger — a carnival of the undefinable.

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Fifth definition of circus

Angels can fly because they take can themselves lightly. [...] Satan fell by the force of gravity.

— G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

A retired clown is giving advice to an enthusiastic young student.

‘We should not connive in the construction of our own abject formats, the surface currents we generate, nor run a ruler over
depth and flow while our thoughts flit haphazardly from rock to sky then plunge abruptly towards uncharted oceanic depths, the source of our peerless intuition, our bottomless rage. We create a ladder to another world by means of interfaces and incubators. By liquidating situations, we express our resistance to *stasis*.

The student (an ageing trickster) remains patient, having already converted millennia of ambition into stone.

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8. Reflection on polyrhythms

We are no longer equipped to experience our experiences.

The pace of one world seems increasingly incompatible with the pace of another.

A storm roils up the estuary. Lightning strikes the cranes. The pylons crash in an eruption of showering electric sparks — a birthing of angels.

It is announced over the site megaphone that each accident of weather is, in fact, a fine opportunity for repurposing the self.

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Final definition of circus

At the end of the day … at the end of the day … strictly speaking … and so therefore … it is my honour … when all is said and done … without whom … *saucy, saucy!* … and with that in mind … none of this would have been possible … you have to laugh … so let the show —

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9–14. *The letting go*

*In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

— 1 Cor 15:52

To imagine circus is to slip the body from its moorings.

I dream of performing circus in storm and gale alike, roped to a creaking rig in Dogger, watched only by stars, sea spray, and the occasional incurious gull. I can fly, balance, soar, spin, and fall.

Towards dawn, I am in the company of an angel, its ribs torn asunder, its exposed innards heaving under sea spray. The angel tells me not to fear.

A helicopter arrives to drop provisions. I display gratitude. Unclip. Act casual. No angel here! I wave from my churning landscape. Thumbs up from pilot as she lifts away. I will become the hunger artist. It is a straight line down to the waves.

I write an essay on the impossibility of angels rotting. My body flexes, my arms move constantly over the page, trying to avoid repetition. Through writing, I leave all that has been and all that will be and inhabit solely the moment of now, a moment that contains all times at once. The ink behaves strangely in this climate. Fluid life. Dark blue lake. Oozing tentacles.

I write a treatise on the impossibility of angels performing acrobatics; their movements would be entirely without artistic merit since, lacking friction, they would merely float like puffy astronauts, or bloated bodies brought to the beach from a tsunami, tumbling slowly in the tide.
I write a poem about the threads in the night sky, long, and narrow, with which we bind each other, until our bandages become a seeping, weeping, luminous web, in which we are enmeshed.

On waking, I see the angel has added a verse:

_I fold my skin over yours_
_You roll your skin around mine_
_And there we stay, unseeing and unseen —_
_strange flower of forever flesh,_
_forever bursting to bud._

But every day the drop, I say …
Every day —
Fall never —

[Pause]

_Snap!_ laughs the angel.

One morning, far away and long ago, while straddling a low, greasy wharf by a quay at the extremity of a canal, my long legs on each side down to the water, which had become black with stagnation, the black water yielding continually, letting my thoughts sink into soft vacancy, a faint scent of oranges and wood smoke winnowing over the stench of putrefaction, I saw you, tumbling across the sky, a possible pivot in this new world of rotation and churn; I would have gripped you as you neared, held tight until we hinged and fused, but you were already gliding to other co-ordinates, auto-smiling through the dense weather — our fingers almost touching, but trailing further and further away, plucked from their knuckles, pointing elsewhere, until — matchsticks in a storm — gone.

The angel shows me how to take up a deathless position and wait. The waking waiting tedious as scientific method. Survival
memories in a black hole. Light our currency. Black light. Sunless, dappled twilight captured on your pupil.

Drift.

That was the moment we realised we did not need kings, queens, presidents, nor gods. Nor did we need permissions, categories, or constraints that were not of our own choosing. We did not even need a guide.

And so we stood, facing each other. Sack of lined flesh. Angel.

Waiting.

What we discovered is something quite remarkable.

*When we create conditions for care and attention, the world enters.*

The world enters and it goes from one to the other, slyly unmasking us.

It waits until we are open and attentive, then disrobes in turn.

The room’s molecules start whispering — we lean forward to listen. They curl around us, draw us closer together.

Closer.

Closer still.

*The world is alive.*

In time, the human body forgets it belongs to the circus and starts to seep and drip over the edges of the mattress. Like mercury it rolls across the floor, a shiny glob of reflected candlelight, rigging, wheels, stuffed animals. As precise as a bead of
sweat descending the rope artist’s spine, it slips under the door and towards the motionless waves that surround the platform.

I watch it until it stops. Flesh becoming angel. Word made static.

The trickster returns with a back flip.
*I would dig a grave, but I lack a spade!*  
He laughs like a cartoon villain caught in a drain.

Winter. The body now a mere 21 grams; it skims the sparkling crust of snow on the frozen sea, its salts carving indecipherable runes — melting, it becomes water, steam, mirror mist.

Inside the mirror, rising steadily, a black, hot air balloon drifts towards a hole in the sky. We dive headlong into the silver pool and grip the lifting basket.

This is what we seek out, that place, that here, and only here, where we can be our own, irreconcilably entangled selves — fingers clutching the weave of it all, hanging, affirming, ascending …

then, finally

… the letting go.