

GNOME
BAKER
I



Michael Davidson was born in 1944 in Oakland California. He attended San Francisco State College and the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1970 he and his wife moved to Berkeley California where both worked for a mountaineering firm. At the same time, he completed his PhD. dissertation on the work of Robert Duncan. In 1973, he left Berkeley to teach at San Diego State University and separated from his wife. Since that time he has taught courses in modern literature and has been the director of the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California at San Diego.

His work has appeared in OPEN READING, CATERPILLAR, CRAWL OUT YOUR WINDOW, VORT, CHICAGO REVIEW, FATHAR and elsewhere. Recently, he and Fred Moramaroo have completed a book on painting and poetry during the post-War period to be titled The Painterly Poets, American Poetry and Visual Esthetic. His books include: Exchanges (Proses and Verses Press), Two Views of Pears (Sand Dollar), and The Mutabilities (Including The Foul Papers) (Sand Dollar).

He is the recipient of a NEA Creative Writing Grant for 1976-77 and will travel in Europe during the fall.

After Engels

"Thanks for your note, Bob"
or
"Bob visited last week,"
there were too many Bobs,
father and mother, Aunt Mabel and Edna
came out of the war
with a letter from the front
in their minds
and passed it on,
now on all the checks
I sign the name
of a bright tree (perhaps
birch)
which stands for me
in this way
paper transferred.

Talking: if so
anywhere, as in
well and
but usefully,
Hi Paul, hey Lauren, hi
nevertheless, you
reflexive: yourself
variations on
wonderful, marve lous, fantastic, etc.
phone L.B.T. and M.
copper cleaner, poster, job list, mail,
Jeeezus Christ, Christ! Jesus, for...!

some think it simple to talk
and so do effortlessly
without notes,
others think
to talk at all
have marvelous, wonderful, fantastic
conversations
among themselves
end up da da goo goo
before our makers.

There you are
and all I
have to do
is reach across
after the salad course
to where you will
hear this
albeit truncated version
due to the shortness
of your break
but nevertheless
Clorinda, empty
clouds float over us
filling the sky
with tea spoons and souffles
for this
a longer version
unedited, including
particulars of toes and kneecap
and several birthmarks
fills with moisture
in the north
and threatens.

"The feeling the a need to hurry"
a character once he jumps is
and the wheels still running
worse than this the pit
where before having friendships and
been drinking then a truck late at night
shot 8: four beercans in air
repeat shot 21 and 22 from over shoulder
at one second intervals
what he thought was candy
isn't
how can we help him?

Small differences protect him from large difference
the margin reappears to the left
as planned
but the right
and how to end
what was impossible to conceive,
he lay awake thinking of sleep
imagining what dreams would borrow his life
and into what gingerbread houses
she would take him,
the corners of loneliness are not so sharp,
rounded in fact
to imitate the globe
or retina
through which inverted pictures
propose an empty room:
when he arrived
she offered her oven
which sounded like haven
and naturally, and being a fine young lad
and lost
he accepted
this is the big difference
between empty and full
someone knows where you are
and lets you

Going on
because why not, the rage
is going on without handles or buttons,
you cut your hair, took a pill,
became ill at every end
all for me
but we haven't learned a thing
about rage,
no one has told you
what we have to say to each other
since no one cares to,
who are these others I keep
bringing into the picture
who say
stop it here and here
they have a point
because finally
anyone knows this
you best of all
and now even I
don't say
why not

In its pure form
 the schedule amounts to this:
 AB to AE
 followed by first visitation,
 the witch comes to cottage door
 bread baking from within and an apple
 handed BA to BD
 who upon tasting relates that tale
 mentioned before in 1.3; fair prince,
 steed in rein, approaches
 singing:
 the joys of midwifery
 are the only joys for me
 neath the concentric farthingales
 proceed DA,DB
 but of armor we have heard
 and Norfolk moves past Openbourne
 in which donor syndrom reoccurs
 elicits 3 lies and one prophecy (disbelieved)
 for she can be replaced with a ruby
 or feast, D1, 5 & 9
 because in that form her story
 "hath a glorious luster and light"
 he could never discover, try as he would,
 she referred him to himself
 who, lacking lands, is on the road
 (substitution for E 5 & 6)
 the point being
 she tastes, has tasted and will
 taste whatever's handed her

He comes to that lake
of which we have heard mention
along a line whose history
includes the castle, the dwarf and the sow
he has yet to encounter
watering in the reflection of yon
precipice, the glimmer of her shawl
resting beneath armor;
he rests and falls
which occurs whenever darkness penetrates
into sleep
as part of the trail and the broken twig
stepped on by Roland, the Red Cross Knight
and Barney the Baker
who by the pound confects a paste
the narratologist encounters
midway to Troy.

Even this way it amounts to the same thing
a nose in pain, a clean table
lunch way up in the arroyo
and back for shrimp
we are hardly friends
but as long as the money keeps on coming
I can see the end already
like the close to the opus 100
or the interruption of this discourse
by the phone in Xanadu

Variations on fades and dissolves
if I say Descartes
have I read him and if read
better than not at all
and understood? remember
a ball of wax which fades
or "waned", a moon
is covered by the sun by day
by night
I'm ready to be confused
this is when my "me" comes out
or fades
according to Descartes
which for eight years
I forgot but lived
and moved around a lot
no larger than a ball,
the hand is early
while the brain is late
and something that he never thought
or maybe lost
while I was moving west
and wondering about today
when the sun was out
the eucalyptus waved
and sent a smell of April
on its way
through the wind
and common talk

What do I want from the poem?
Nothing,
the adventure of events
wheels, the gearshift,
active interchange of empty flags,
memory resolved by further proof
that 1953's impossible to remember,
a schoolyard, absence of Gertrude Stein
all the while THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY
has been written and read
while I begin my autobiography:
in the year 1969 I married
the cheerleader, carhop, fullback or poetry teacher
Mrs. Whatsername who gave me my first book
the poems of Robert Frost
whose "Hired Man"
has been forgotten
along with what I wrote
to earn it: "Ballad of the Demolisher's Ball"
after which we were taught
the psychology of time
the archetypes of Jung
and a number of ways
the poem abolishes chance
by its strict proportions
and steady hand

She's an old friend,
we have a drink
or dinner
the point of which
comes at the end
where it's assured
we should get together
since nothing's promised
nothing's lost
banks believe this
and charge interest
we don't know
what hit us

It comes out
I'm to go in
to this welter of people
and talk
and what they have in mind
has left for Yarmouth
in search of Steerforth
and someone else
starts up a collection
for orphans
of the earthquake
but I go out of sleep
into that small room
and thank my lucky stars
it's really Tuesday
and the plane hasn't left.

In between something probably more interesting
like "the wetness of waves"
which the mouth makes happily
without thought
and dinner (which tonight
features lonely meatballs and lonelier
broccoli)
comes the furtive record
of everything I have been today
and before and everything
in the before-which upon which
I base the present
which has missed almost everything
except the wetness of waves
which hardly spoke at all
but puckered the lips twice
and let poor forgotten afflatus
blow



Rita Myers, born in Hammonton, New Jersey in 1947, received a B.A. from Douglass College in 1969. She completed her graduate work at Hunter College in 1974 and currently lives and works in New York City. Her recent video installations have made extensive use of written texts, in the form of continuous spoken narrations combined with the visual setting.

Her work has appeared in numerous group exhibitions, including Circuit, a traveling video exhibition organized by David Ross; c. 7500, a traveling exhibition organized by Lucy R. Lippard; and, most recently, The New American Filmmakers Series, an Exhibition of Videotapes at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This spring she had a one-artist exhibition at The Kitchen in New York City. She is a current recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

INVESTIGATION/OBSERVATIONS. "We Are Alone Here."

"An ordinary room...anonymous furnishings...the scene of an incident...the narrator, the investigators, the participants in the incident...detective story unraveling the evidence...the setting here is artificial...too bland to yield evidence...unlike the detective story, the past cannot be reconstructed from present reality...narrator is forced into speculation...the function of the room remains indefinite.

...character of the incident left open for the viewer to fill in...where the viewer's imagination will lead...objects are mute...

The room is autonomous...the narrator is an intruder...caught in ambiguous surroundings...video reconstructs the narrator's movements...seeing the room in bits and pieces, over and over again, it becomes integrated after a certain amount of time...boundaries of the room coincide with the narrator's present reality.



INVESTIGATION/OBSERVATIONS. "We are alone here." 1975.

It is quiet here now. We are alone. The others have left. They have taken their instruments, sensitive measuring devices with which they detect, examine, analyze, puncturing solid surfaces, producing microscopic substances from empty spaces, converting them into evidence, supplying innumerable links with the past. Nothing is opaque. Nothing is insignificant. They are voracious. Nothing escapes their sophisticated probes. They leave behind an almost palpable air of tension, dense, acrid, a feeling of rawness aggravated by the assault of their instruments.

This is the first time that we have been allowed here, without the others. Our movements through the room are slow and deliberate. We examine the contents of the room, carefully studying each object. The surfaces of the objects are dull. They are covered by a thin film of gray dust.

These objects have already been thoroughly inspected. An investigation is taking place. The search has been exhaustive, rigorous. The investigators have employed every means of detection at their disposal, dissecting the contents of the room, transforming the fragments into a source, a witness, reconstructing the fragments into a motive, a possible act. Nothing in the room has been moved or re-arranged. It is exactly as it was when the investigators first entered. Now they have gone. We can be alone.

Outside it is raining. There is someone walking on a path which leads eventually to this room. He is wearing a heavy coat and a hat to protect himself from the rain. We do not know him. He does not know that we are here. If he continues walking in this direction, it will take him only a short time to reach us.

We are not wanted here. Our presence is intrusive. It is feared that we will obstruct the smooth functioning of the investigation. But we are determined. We will not turn back. The desire to pursue this to its ultimate end has taken hold of us as strongly as it did the investigators.

The first flurry of activity has died down. So far, those conducting the investigation have discharged their duties with brisk efficiency, calmly expecting an early resolution. But now their confidence has been shaken. It is giving way to bewilderment and this in turn to obsession. They are beginning to show signs of fatigue, but they cannot stay away. When they are not physically here, their thoughts drift back, retracing their steps, cataloguing the same inventory of possibilities, making the same calculations over and over again - a vacant room, miscellaneous objects, particles of dust, lint, scuff marks; something happened; it was premeditated, spontaneous; one person, two, maybe more. They are driven. The threat of another failure grows.

Now the waiting begins. Like all the other times, the possibilities are tested with meticulous, patient scrutiny at the outset. The investigation begins with high hopes. Everyone involved betrays his eagerness to find the perfect solution, anticipating the discovery around which all the ill-fitting pieces will fall into place. The solution will be ironclad, beyond doubt. The waiting goes on. It begins to seem as if it will last indefinitely. The tasks soon grow tedious. Out of frustration, they turn to earlier investigations for a guide, and fall into repetitious patterns. Their careful, patient analysis degenerates into a hasty scramble for a way out. They look for an excuse, a simple conclusion. Their tests become ill-conceived and poorly implemented. The clear perfect solution moves further beyond their reach. They set their sights a little lower, hoping to eliminate the necessity for the investigation altogether.

We are new to this, untried but anxious to learn. The others do not trust us. Under the guise of helpfulness, they treat our presence here with thinly veiled antipathy. What talents we might possess command little respect. Mere good instincts don't count. They regard our efforts as disruptive. We can only contribute to the eventual collapse of the investigation, hastening their own surrender to its demise. Their fears are contagious. They weaken our resolve to keep our distance. Their skepticism obscures the role which we know we must play. We are too willing to relinquish our autonomy. We need constant reminders that for us, this is only an exercise. Otherwise, we will feign indifference. We will become pretenders.

When we began, we were confident of our natural abilities. We would need no guidance. Through sheer fortitude if nothing else, we would seize upon the perfect solution, on our own, independent of the investigator's efforts. Our sense of purpose was our greatest virtue. But we were rash and naive. We could not foresee the obstacles posed by our role. Determination does not compensate for our other shortcomings. Our perceptions are not trained. We have no tools or instruments. Unlike the professionals, our methods are unsophisticated, indiscreet. Lacking in expertise, our early maneuvers were unfocused, without direction, almost blind. We faltered. We hesitated. We also made some remarkable recoveries. We resolved not to succumb. We remain steadfast. Long periods of trial and error yield a clearer perspective. We devise new strategies. We adopt the posture best suited to our role. We narrow the scope of our intervention. We observe. We listen. We handle nothing. We must legitimize our task.

Inside the room, most surfaces are dull, covered by a thin gray film. Fine particles of dust descend steadily. Their smooth, regular descent is intercepted by the surfaces of the tables, the chairs, the smaller objects, the floor. The particles

cling to these surfaces, gradually forming vague second skins. The dust does not come from the outside. It comes from the room itself.

The gray film is not uniform throughout the room. The dust accumulates unevenly into distinct patterns and layers. Each pattern is continuous across the surface of only one object. No pattern bridges more than one object. The depth of each layer is determined by the slope of the surface which it covers. The depths vary according to a regular sequence from the absolutely horizontal to the nearly vertical. Only the difference between the horizontal, which bears the thickest accumulation, and the vertical, which is entirely free of dust, is discernible to us.

Outside it is raining. It has been raining for a long time and it will probably continue for even longer. The rain falls heavily in a steady vertical descent. The ground is warm and a mist rises from it. The rain cannot be seen from here nor does the sound of its falling reach us.

The storm has prevented most people from going outdoors, but there is someone who defies the intemperate weather. He walks slowly in this direction, then turns back.

The investigators will probably not return. Their work is here finished. Photographs have been taken. Bits and pieces of debris have been collected, particles of different materials tested, samples taken and removed to another location, to be prodded, cajoled, seduced out of muteness. There is nothing else to do inside. Now they will maintain a watch from outside and wait. We can remain here only a short time. Then we also will leave. The door will be locked and the room will return to its original empty state. Once again deprived of human access, it will grow cold, lifeless. The chill in the air will return and a new atmosphere of ambiguity will drift in with it. Once again abandoned, the room will be exactly as it was when the investigators first entered. Wild rumors have been touched off by the discovery of the room in this state. They surpass anyone's previous experience. We are unequipped to deal with them. It is a strain to remain objective, convinced as we are that no amount of objectivity will eliminate the rumors.

Before us, the investigators were here. Before them, there was no one here. For a period of time, the room was empty, unoccupied. We do not know how long the room was vacant. This period of time may never be established with any certainty.

Before this, there must have been someone else in the room. He would come here, perhaps frequently. He would move through the room with relative ease. He would wait, perhaps sitting at one of the tables, reading. He would sometimes do nothing but idle the time away. Sometimes the door would be left open. Perhaps he was not always alone. Someone else would meet him here. They would talk. They might have reassured each other.

The dust could not have been a constant then. Its skin would have been perforated, grazed and brushed aside by their movements.

Each visit altered the room slightly. As the visits increased, the room underwent countless minor permutations of form and displacements of space. Each visit erased the preceding one. There would be a changed arrangement of chairs and tables, the addition of another object, and at times, some imperceptible alteration, a dislocation of energy, an oscillation of mood.

The visits stopped. They did not return. One form became the last. A final departure that sealed the room. The door was locked, the room darkened. No one entered. No one left.

We move slowly through the room. We are cautious. Our movements are restrained. We fear unknown consequences, needless disturbances of the room and its contents. All inessential gestures have been eliminated. We talk little. Our steps are carefully measured. We choose one direction at a time, marking the distances between the door, the walls, the objects, noting the placement and relationship of each object first from one vantage point, then from another. This procedure is repeated many times.

Our steps define a network of intersecting lines across the floor. The lines are haphazard, spread in random disarray, as if drawn by chance. We are lured first to one thing, then to another. There is no coherent plan to our movements. Our steps follow no single pattern.

One or two things exert a strong attraction on us, but we cannot linger over these. We must reserve our judgments until later. For now, we conduct our examination impartially, dispensing an equal amount of attention on each object.

The horizontal surfaces beneath the smaller objects are clean. If one of these objects were to be raised, its outline would be clearly delineated in the layer of dust. There would be a blank shape left of the surface, identical to the object itself. Along the circumference of this shape, the thickness of the layer would be exposed. Examining the circumference should verify that the object remained unmoved for a certain period of time. This should be a measurable entity. The blank shape should function as an index of the past. This is not possible. We can disturb nothing. The objects must remain in place while we are here.

We observe and listen. The only sounds to be heard come from the room itself or from our movements. No sounds from outside reach us. The room is sealed. Nothing penetrates. We proceed with extreme caution. We handle nothing. We only watch. The contents of the room have already been scrupulously inspected by the investigators. Because of their restrictions, our movements are hesitant, indecisive. We waver at each step. We disturb nothing. The room remains exactly as it was when we

first entered. Nothing is changed.

Outside there is someone walking. He is alone. He moves slowly, with great effort, as the rain is swept against his body. He is wearing a coat, hat, heavy boots. His movements are labored. His head is bent downward, his chin almost touching his chest. One arm is raised to shield his eyes from the driving rain. He would not be able to know if anyone were inside this room.

His movements follow no consistent order. He approaches, stops, waits, then changes his direction and repeats these movements. He covers a large area in this manner, but there is no apparent logic in his choice of direction. He does nothing else. His head remains bent forward, his eyes cast downward. He is perhaps an observer. He is making a final inspection.

He has been here before. We do not know when. If it were before the period during which the room was vacant, his movements would betray less uncertainty. He would have preceded the investigators, but he also would not have returned. The area of ground which he studies so attentively would not be unfamiliar.

The ground now is soft. The rain has soaked through the topmost layers. The rain is excessive. Here and there it is trapped on the surface of the ground and swells into muddy pools. The rain washed away the imprints left by the man's boots. It has already erased any trace of our movements or that of the investigators.

We have only a short time to complete our task. We cannot be thorough. We touch only the surfaces of things. We try to take it all in at once. We can only observe and listen. All our energies are concentrated on this task.

There is no way to bring these disparate elements into focus, to give them a clear order. For us, these things are dense. Their surfaces are dull. They resist us. Our untrained eyes lack penetration. If we could analyze each object individually, if we could dissect, if we could probe beneath... there is no time.

This constant surveillance helps only to tranquilize us. The sole stimulus is inside the room. It is sealed off from the outside. There are no windows, only one door. Nothing penetrates these walls. Nothing gets in, neither the sun, the rain, nor the wind. Isolated thus from the outside, we are lulled into a feeling of calm. Our purpose in being here begins to evaporate. Shielded by these walls, we have misgivings about our task. Our suspicions are soothed away. We grow tranquil, settle into a more peaceful state of mind. This could not have been the place. It is too calm. The setting is not believable. We are the only ones here. We might even be the first ones. No one else has ever been here. It has always been empty.

This is a dangerous lapse. The investigators predicted this reaction. They warned us against this feeling of calm. It is a trap. It always feels this way. It always seems so innocent.

DUMBDADDEADDADUMB

Video production by Carlotta Schoolman. Stills by David Allison.

Full Stop

The body at rest, or, nearly at rest. The body rolls on the hip bones. Advance, pause. Back to center, no pause. Full retreat, pause. Repeat. No other movements. A complete set here. A stabilized condition.

Swing forward, cannot reach the wall. Momentary hesitation. Swing backward, cannot get away. One more hesitation. Repeat.

The body held in check. The mind still engaged. Premonition sucks it forward. Memory snaps it back.

False contradictions

The feet lie flat on the floor. The soles are metal. The floor is a magnet. The heels of the feet can be raised slightly. One foot at a time. This frees the ball of the foot. It makes a twisting motion on the floor, creating circular scratch marks. Turning the heel one quarter circle to the left plus one quarter circle to the right equals one full circle at the ball of the foot. This is a complete movement.

The hands are clenched together on the knees. Periodically, the fingers separate and move toward the wall. The wall will be a handle which the hands will grasp, enabling the arms to pull the body into an upright position. The arms do not reach the wall. The hands fall onto the knees and the fingers knit back together again. This is an incomplete movement.



The limits of the arc

The body rocks back and forth. The torso rolls on the hip bones. The upper part of the body is in constant motion. The lower part is still. The body describes an arc in the air overhead. It creates its own halo. The length of the arc is equal to one quarter circle. Within the arc, the body is stable.

The acute angle between the legs and the torso in the extreme forward position is complemented by the obtuse angle between the legs and the torso in the extreme backward position. Less energy is required to attain the forward position. A slight relaxation of the spine causes the body to yield under its own weight. A slightly greater discharge of energy at the pelvis is needed to pull the body back again. The return of the body backward, after it has fallen forward, is inevitable. This is aimless movement. A stabilized condition.

The body is locked into the path of the arc it creates. The air above the body is thick. It is a solid dome. The head inscribes a smooth parabola against the inner surface of the dome. The solid dome succumbs to a process of erosion. A slender path of one quarter circle in length is being worn out here.

Blanks

The hands rest on the knees, palms down. The fingers are spread apart. He stares at the corner of the wall and floor. The hands are out of focus for him.

The body rocks back and forth. He counts off the movements of the body by lifting one finger for each forward and each backward motion. He counts off in groups of ten, then starts over. The fingers move more rapidly than the body. He measures the rhythm of the arc. He paces himself.

Earlier sequences

Before the confinement of the arc. The body moves through space. The lower as well as the upper part. The body moves with ease.

The mind delivers the body from harm. The mind is in control. The body follows. The body senses objects. The mind negotiates them. The mind commands. The body obeys. The body feels empty spaces. The mind gauges their size.

The mind and the body function symbiotically. The core activity is electrical. A minimal firing overcomes the body's natural inertia. A multiplication of firings brings the parts of the body together in fluid combinations. Bone, muscle, joints, tendons joined in a complex number of linkages. The parts of the body move in sequence, filling in the space which surrounds them. Simple adjustments in the alignment of hip to knee and knee to ankle alter the spatial configurations of the body.

The hip bones swivel in their sockets, thrusting the legs out in front of the torso, first one leg then the other, bringing the feet down onto the floor, first one foot, then the other, creating a rhythmical pattern of sounds. First, slowly, walking; then, accelerating, the rhythm is stepped up; finally, running at full speed, the sound is constant.

On the run, his body is an intricate balance of contractions and relaxations. A full set of movements here. The set expands as the need arises. This is a unique set. A lifetime of repetition has reduced the most complex of his body's movements into reflex actions. His movements are distinct. They have become part of the basic condition of his body. These movements are suited only to the mover.

He runs without stopping. The electrical firings come more rapidly. The gaps between firings are nearly eliminated. The parts of the body are locked into one sequence of movements, which is repeated over and over again. He tries to maintain his pace. Fatigue overtakes him. The parts of the body strain to complete each new sequence of movements.

The points of stress

The threat begins a cycle of movement. An examination of the threat shows it to be empty. It is a blank. This does not alter what proceeds from it.

Recognition of the threat produces skepticism. Skepticism leads to standing firm.

A second look at the threat enlarges it. The enlargement generates the fear of entrapment.

A further examination of the threat confirms the fear. The fear makes him leave the place he occupies and pursue another.

All subsequent movements proceed from this.

Running

The body is mobile. The air surrounding the body is a loose vapor. The particles of air are separated by wide distances. The particles collide infrequently, and then drift apart languorously. Their random movements create large pockets of empty space. The body skims through these spaces.

The mind senses what is behind the body. The mind locks onto a destination ahead of the body. The forward motion of the body is constant. The motive is an empty threat but it must, nonetheless be eliminated. Only constant motion will wipe away the threat. He overtakes his destination and continues running.

Alternate configurations

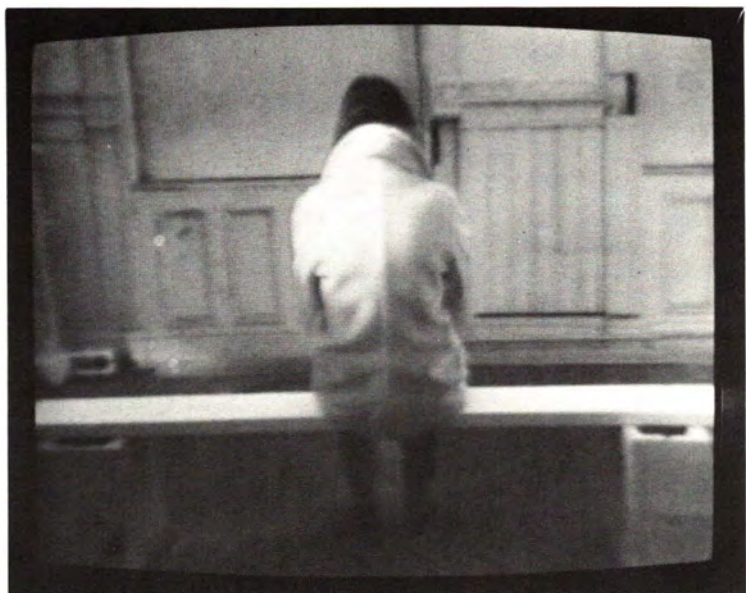
The legs stretch out before the torso, one leg at a time. The feet fall heavily to the ground, in sequence. The foot steps land in definite rhythm. The body is lifted up, and forward.

A wire fence. The hands grasp at the fence. The fingers bend at the knuckles, clenching the sharp wires in the soft part of the joints. Frantic, the hands shake the fence, pulling the wires apart from each other. One or two weak links give. The hands stretch the wires into an opening, carefully bending back the loose ends and uncoiling one or two more links. The opening is large enough for his body.

As he runs, the elbows are bent so that the lower part of the arms are perpendicular to the body. The hands pump the air ahead of his body. The neck rotates sideways so that his chin is parallel to his shoulder. The eyes move to the extreme corner of their sockets, taking in what is behind him.

The window. His hand is balled into a fist. The arm draws the fist back even to his shoulder, gathering momentum, then thrusts it forward all the way. The fist hits and penetrates the glass.

Full stop. His torso pitches forward and down as his hands grab his knees. His arms stiffen and support the upper part of his body at the shoulders. His mouth is dry. It hangs open as he chokes down great mouthfuls of air.



Resistance

The particles of air ahead of his body are heavy. They are densely packed. The particles bond together into a thin elastic skin which is spread in front of him, concealing his destination. The skin is taut. His body presses into it as he runs. He cannot sidestep or penetrate it. As it is stretched tighter, he must slow down.

The air is a tympanum against which his fists beat a desperate rhythm. The drumming grows louder as his pace slackens.

Supressing the configurations

The chase draws to a close. The bones swell in their sockets. The electrical firings grow weaker. The lower part of the body is weighed down. The muscles of the legs are held in a state of contraction. The corresponding intervals of relaxation subside. The set of available reflexes is diminished. The body runs down.

Natural inertia overcomes forward momentum. The lower part of the body is motionless. This is not a total paralysis. The torso continues to jerk forward. The limit of this movement is set only by the amount of pull which the hip joint can sustain.

False contradictions

The hands are clenched together on the lap. The fingers unbend and the hands slide down the sides of the legs. The palms of the hands come to rest flat against the upper surface of the bench. The hands slide toward the front of the bench and the fingers curl around its edge. The fingers press tightly against the under surface of the bench. The elbow joints lock and the muscles of the arms go rigid. The arms are a wedge between the bench and the shoulders. They jam the forward motion of the body. The spine stiffens as it presses the torso against the arms. The torso will not rock. This is a stable condition.

The body is bent deeply at the pelvis. The torso is thrown forward and rests on the upper part of the legs. The body is relaxed. The shoulders are even with the knees. The head hangs down in front of the legs. The top of the head points to the floor. The eyes are closed. The arms hang loosely to the floor, parallel to the lower part of the legs. The fingers brush the floor in a slow circular motion. This is an unstable condition.

Later sequences

The body in motion. The torso pitches forward but does not return. He begins the sequence of movements which will guide the parts of the body into a standing position. Here forward momentum builds, and prevents the hip joints from pulling the body back again. He leans into the wall. The spine pulls the torso slowly upward. He shifts the bulk of his weight to the lower part of the body. He begins to straighten his legs. The legs exert a downward pressure on the floor.

This sequence of movements comes to an abrupt end. He is unable to complete the sequence as it was begun. The body is immediately overtaken by undirected movements. The wall sags. The floor sweats and bulges. Empty crevices are pushed into the seams between the floor boards. The surface of the wall thins out and spills into these spaces. His body follows. The knees buckle. The spine goes liquid. The torso slips sideways. The legs slide away from the torso. The body twists onto the floor.

His breathing stops momentarily and then resumes slowly and deeply. His eyes are closed. The body completely motionless. The mind follows the body.

Falling

The parts of the body stretch to complete each sequence of forward movements. The body loses its density. The substance of the body thins out and is drawn into long loosely spaced fibers. The mouth hangs open. The lungs are too porous to contain the air which the body needs.

The air is leaden. The substance of the body is pulled apart. It is lighter than the particles of air. The body is too frail to support the air above it. The particles of air are too heavy to remain suspended above the body.

The particles of air are welded into a solid dome which fits the head tightly. The body yields.

The stability of the arc

The moment of arrival. The point of departure. The mind races ahead, but the body cannot follow. The chase is over. He has brushed against a solid object in the dark. The solid object is immovable. Immovable object sidesteps irresistible force. He must back away. His body is spent. No more running.

The condition of uncertainty. To remain here is dangerous. To leave would yield unpredictable consequences. He is locked into a compromise. The arc is simple. The resolution of two opposing forces. For every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction. The body pitches forward and rolls backward. Every forward thrust of the body is met with an equal pull backward. Within the arc, external conditions are stabilized.

A spontaneous bleeding

In the dark, he sits on the cold floor. His legs are stretched out to their full length. The wall supports his motionless body. His head is thrown back against the wall. His vertebrae curve into the corner of the wall and the floor. His breathing comes evenly and regularly, but not deeply. His arms lie on the floor at either side of his body. The hands are open and the palms turned upward. He stares at the blank wall opposite him.

From the other side of the wall comes a low throbbing sound which is not heard but felt. The pitch does not vary. The sound is transmitted through the wall directly into his spine.

On his wrists appear two short red lines. There is no sensation of pain. Feeling has abandoned his body and clings only to the tips of his fingers. The heart pumps steadily into the lines, which sever the closed circulation of his blood. His pulse is faint. The lines throb gently as two shallow red pools beneath his wrists.

He does not stir. This is an empty threat. The pools will not swell beyond a certain point.

He stares down at his wrists. Slowly, he rotates both hands, holding the palms up. The knuckles press into the floor in slow sequence. This is deliberate movement. The lines coagulate.



Michael Palmer was born in New York City in 1943. He was educated at Harvard and now lives and works in San Francisco. His books include Blake's Newton and The Circular Gates (Black Sparrow Press).

Story of Story

In September of 1975 Margaret Jenkins asked whether I would be interested in designing a solo dance work for her to perform during her company's season. I began by offering several pages of 'suggestions or instructions' concerning the parameters of movement in the piece. In these I tried to avoid a specific movement vocabulary (leaving that to Margy), specifying instead ideas of variation, referentiality and structure. At that point however, I became dissatisfied with the form the notes were taking and decided that it would be more interesting to write a prose piece to accompany the dance, and to include both explicit and concealed instructions concerning the direction and shape of the work. The main premise was that 'It should move like speaking.' By this I meant that the solo should take the curve of stylisation and semantic density of the text as a range of limits. Yet as I had stated in the preliminary notes, one problem was how 'to make suggestions without getting in the way.' To this end I added, as one suggestion, the notion that any given suggestion could be disregarded.

Gradually the work grew to include the entire company performing linked solo activities in various relations to Margy's solo. Limits and choices evolved concerning the number of dancers in the space at a given time, and how and when to execute designated movement. (After the first couple of performances we would occasionally supplement the possibilities for a particular evening, e.g., 'Become involved in a duet and a trio at least once during the performance while maintaining the movement.') The entire text as recorded lasts about forty minutes, though a number of twenty minute versions have also been performed.

From the beginning I had thought of Story as an independent text as well as an accompaniment to the dance, but I am struck now by the different feel of it on the page. Specifically, where as a publication it is more or less fixed, as a performance piece it remains open to the introduction or elimination of material, and to the variable use of pauses or silences between 'days' and sections of 'days' (of course the piece could be modified typographically to encourage this). On the page its initiatory function is eliminated, and the question of ambient sound diminishes in importance. Also, the most interesting aspect of the work for me stemmed from the qualities of response it evoked from the dancers. Their role was obviously central to the work as a whole, in a sense reshaping the text itself at each performance. On the other hand Story had been conceived as a moving through states of writing and narrative layers, and this side of the text seems more clearly available from the printed version.

Story was first performed on February 27, 1976 at the Margaret Jenkins Dance Studio in San Francisco.

The dancers were: John Henry, Andrea Hicks, Margaret Jenkins, Michele Larsson, Judy Lazaroff, Virginia Matthews, Larry McQueen, Colleen Mulvihill, Jeffrey Smith, Lucinda Weaver, Lonna Wilkinson.

Story

for one woman dancing
and ambient sound

30 january

Of a story they would tell each a version, they would tell a hatred of telling and of turning. She the lovely lady slightly crazy. He the one not ready for the occasion. A small unseemly creature waiting beneath a bridge or in a book would go trip trap. That was a troll whose job it was to take the toll. Of a story each would tell one version in the hatred of the telling and the turning. From her studies she would learn how to earn a living. From his reading he would unlearn how not to resist interfering with slipping into the well. At the bottom of the well the water is said to feel cold. From the mouth of the well air and light descend in quantities adequate to the story. According to his recollection an old woman fully clothed stood to the left of the tree and a young girl naked to the right. According to hers, the old woman was naked and the young girl dressed in dark peasant skirt and blouse with a grey shawl wrapped tightly around her breasts and covering her head. In first opening the letter he had cut his thumb making it difficult to hold a pen. The embarrassment of forgetting a name, for example one's own. Entering the room he had explained that everything was all right, that in fact 'he' was 'her wife', therefore entitled to be in the room. The meeting of eyes is limited to situations which may later occasion a greater intimacy, but the chance contact of certain neutral areas such as the elbow area is permitted in most cultures without undue implication thereby being derived. In the following chapter behavior on vehicles of public transit is discussed. After that sidewalks, restaurants, libraries and theaters. The unseemly creature would emerge from the dark place beneath the bridge and demand the toll, and all would pay it and cross to the other side. There each would recite a version of the telling or the turning.

31 january

If the fire. If the fire came the fields would burn would the fields burn. Now the pen had exploded soaking his shirt. Would the fields burn. If the fire came they would run. They would run alongside. He had watched the flames engulf the railroad tracks, burning first the brush and scrub oak, then setting fire to the ties. This at a bend in the track where the engine and leading coaches became visible for a moment, the orange engine but the silver coaches, and his coach also to be silver, a cloud-shaped absence of color.

24 november

For ten or twenty is this about memory.

The woman with the clip-board came up to us in the park and asked my mother what color soap she preferred and she said white because its purer, naturally I was disappointed. Or is today November 23rd.

25 november

A phone call from Kitty about the possibility of seeing McClure's new play, the problem being that neither of us knows which nights it's running. Once one of us finds out he or she must then call the other to see if that night is free, but whoever 'the other' is at that point must then check with Ron and/or Cathy to make sure they also can go that night. A third call between us then becomes necessary before telephoning the box office to reserve four seats. First balcony rear, seven dollars each.

Earliest memory: of black-out shades drawn in a New York apartment. Of Florida.

To remember the story and how long it will last. Or how long it will go on.

The thought of being that the solo should not respond to the events the story contains, but to what the words may come to mean. Might once have seemed to mean. Gloomy Sunday is a song.

Earliest memory: I'm lying in a carriage or crib, a carriage, listening to various adults, including my parents, discuss the fact that I can't yet understand what they are saying.

All this would happen very late at night.

26 november

And the very early morning of the same night, Los Angeles con-

tinues to burn. The usual pictures of homeowners with garden hoses and of film stars in bathrobes. Satellite photograph of smoke curling out over the Pacific, the leading edge beginning to turn south. (I'm looking at yesterday's paper.) An important lawyer has fallen into a comma. (Today's paper.) Wind rising.

Living in Europe during that time I learned to enjoy dancing.

Living in Europe during that time I learned to enjoy dancing.

28 november

It isn't the coffee or the hour. And a field of crows eating last night's bread. 'Evenly distributed' she said. Even distributed like that the melodic phrase remains simple, one note per crow, one per tree, one per cloud, and so on. The instructions are clear: to avoid ornament, rubato, any deflection from the line. On the other hand only the person they address will be there to interpret them.

It isn't the coffee or the hour. The way a pen suddenly begins skipping although supposedly full of ink, although it's full of ink. My notes from that period in Morocco are long since lost but they would show that I never slept since in those days there was no reason to. At most some afternoons I was willing to permit a kind of half-sleep, in order to generate hypnagogic images.

In Italy on the other hand I would sleep all the time, the landscape seemed to demand it, that combination of olive green and slate. Occasionally I would wake to find a woman in my bed whom I didn't recognise. We would introduce ourselves and exchange casual conversation while she dressed, eventually knotting the velvet sash at her waist then politely, as they say, departing.

The question is really why I've added the business about the velvet sash, and why the unnecessary 'as they say'. Why not simply, 'then quietly closing the door behind her,' or does that also accede to an easy suggestiveness, as if the entire story had not yet been told. As in 'Tune in tomorrow to find out whether...'

Earliest memory: Annie and I are walking along one of the beaches on her father's island. She stops and points with her left arm

to a patch of meadow above the beach where a small orchard will be planted this coming fall. Beyond the meadow a white frame house. To the right of the house a vegetable garden. And further to the right the woods begin.

Clear and cold. Clear and cold and the ground still soft from yesterday's rain.

30 may

'In the natural numbers the problem of cognition presents itself to us in its simplest form.'

7 march

Octavio Paz, 'We have ceased to recognise ourselves in the future...' Followed by a note on entropy, then Plato's warning against telling stories.

29 november

The pen seems to be working again, the problem apparently having been with the ink. A viscous layer had settled to the bottom of the bottle and during the refilling process was drawn into the barrel, causing the uneven flow. And a note to myself last night, 'Feed downstairs plants and so on.' The 'and so on' referring either to other plants that should be fed, those up here for example, or to something entirely unrelated such as the need to buy salt or Ricardo's birthday present, or to have the slow leak in the right front tire repaired. But why nothing about replacing the bottle of ink.

This is a city of signals.

Spring 1871

This is a city of sleep in love with its shadows.

2 december

Possible first names for composers: Mario, John, Anton, Harry, Cornelius, Earle, Luciano, Morton, Charles, Christian, Baldassare, Jean Claude.

3 december

4 december

Ahead of time or out of time. Windows of careful grey meaning clearest grey. Of empty sound meaning open, one foot before another, arms as counterweight, sycamore, elm, scarlet gum, magnolia, white ash, bay laurel, light after light, care to form rows where no rows, white horses from brown, cars to sing where no speaking allowed.

Possible first names for poets: Bob, Louis, Anne, Lewis, John, Bill, Paul, Helen, Barbara, Frank, David, Carl.

This part occurs on film.

5 december

Having then died back to reappear. He will ask her.

Him asking her. This moth that would enter the light. That would enter the light or wouldn't if it could. And flickers instead over terracotta roof. Drunk the previous week he had danced out a window across it, dislodging a tile to shatter on the waterfront below. La Signora hadn't smiled but kept him on, needing apparently the rent. So they go to bed. So they will go to bed, sleep five hours, rise and drink coffee. Having been or having lived with, not the English girl but her friend, and then he cut his thumb. (Then he cut his thumb.)

Earliest memory: of falling from the window. Of falling from

the hotel window. Of falling from a tower. A stone tower or a wooden water tower.

And every succession may be stated in the following propositions: (1) in the course of an irreversible finite series the use of any position reduces the number of remaining positions; (2) each position in a series affords only a limited number of possibilities of action; (3) the choice of an action commits the corresponding position; (4) taking a position both defines and reduces the range of possibilities in the succeeding position.

Stated differently: every new form limits the succeeding innovations in the same series.

Earliest memory: we're playing softball against a semi-pro team, Castor Convertible, and trailing 3-0 in the bottom of the seventh inning, and their pitcher has loaded the bases on a single and two walks. I come to bat having already struck out twice. I swing at the first pitch and miss, and the second is a curve high and inside which I take for ball one. Next a fastball, outside corner, chopped foul behind first base, followed by another fastball, high. The fifth pitch is a change which I hit into the woods in right-center field for a home run, grand slam, we win the game 4-3 and a keg of Knickerbocker beer.

This part disregards itself.

22 january

Dear Sir,

I am travelling in the countries of East Africa and, being occupied at the moment with forming a troop of elephant hunters, I would be extremely grateful to you for enlightening me as quickly as possible on the following subject:

Is a special type of firearm used to hunt elephants?

What recommends its use?

Where can it be found? At what price?

What sort of ammunition, poisonous or exploding?

For me it's a matter of buying two such guns - and possibly another half-dozen after we test them.

Thanking you in advance for your reply, I remain your servant,

Arthur Rimbaud

7 december

Are we in the seeing of somewhere else. Elsewhere and under, the ladder sways and an hour is three times lost. Can you write it outside the time, walk and walk, little cobbles, shadowed poles, seams of light you cross to find a river. And look at how the sky. Look at how the sky becomes crowded with messages to be left unread or be read in part then forgotten. Eat this it says so you eat it, follow this arrow you follow, hoping there'll be a film at the other end or some place to sit. Important in that sense to take directions from clouds, cirrus today, threaded over low roofs and gilded domes, small birds, sparrows and finches, weaving in and out among the filaments even as the pattern tries to dissolve.

One eye to be rubbed and the city will become a city of bone, a little dust let's suppose at the corner of the visual field, seams of light you cross. 'Ephemeral and not too discontented,' asleep possibly and imagining a town or city, the room full she would say 'you don't really expect to' to anyone who didn't. Light entering at twenty degrees you held your cup on a knee or glass in hand, what is it that appears in such light, turning. The retention of old things is a ritual of society. Would it help to be listening to music.

Seams of light that is you cross to find the river. Talking to begin speaking, certain things the light would catch bit by bit until the pattern was understood and the purpose of the recurring movements made clear.

Earliest memory: I would sleep with one sister and he with the other.

Earliest memory: the objects which gain weight while you watch.

Earliest memory: of turning the pages of a weightless book.

This part is empty.

Certain things the light would hold. Certain things the light would hold by the edge, a cup is less empty. When the father

puts his head inside you to eat the food what will the mother and sister and brother do.

8 december (revised 10 january, 1 february, and 14 february)

One A then one O. For night to come the curtains are drawn. For a drawing to be done the light is turned on. This one is alive and well and the other is a little older. Let's suppose that in putting a foot backward or forward one had done simply that without falling over, then how would you invent a story. Falling there would be water. Standing she would say the first thing must always come before the first, the second before the third, the third before the fifth, and so on. If you agree you are meant to say yes. If and when you disagree you go to the center of the circle. If and when you disagree you go to the center of the circle. Each morning the story will be measurably different, 'fold by fold' or 'fold following fold,' the visible letters to disclose the rest.

9 december

Possible first names for poets: Emily, Robert, Allen, Ron, Charles, Laura, George, Joe, Anne, Philip, Tony, Jack.

Though the water rose no one would consider it. Since it happened each year there was no danger to be considered. Memory so altered regards the markings as exotic like a name. They would cross the river by the new bridge, turn right or left, in ten minutes be lost.

But for her arrival he borrowed someone else's apartment, heat, running water, etc, that they might be equally displaced.

Earliest memory: Annie and I are walking along one of the beaches on her father's island. She stops and points with her left arm to a patch of meadow above the beach where a small orchard will be planted this coming fall. Beyond the meadow a white frame house. To the right of the house a vegetable garden. And further to the right the woods begin.

30 january

Dear Sir,

Wishing to engage in the sale of precision instruments throughout the Orient, I have permitted myself to write to you to request the following service:

I would like to become familiar with everything that France (or any other country) makes best in the field of mathematical, optical, astronomical, electrical, meteorological, pneumatic, mechanical, hydraulic and mineralogical instruments. I am not concerned with surgical instruments. I would be very happy if you could assemble for me all the catalogues relating to these subjects, and trust this matter to your benevolent expertise. People also ask me for catalogues concerning physical games, fireworks, magic, mechanical models, etc.. If interesting products of this type exist in France, or if you know of better ones elsewhere, I would be very grateful to you for sending either catalogues or addresses...

Also please send a Complete Manual for the Manufacture of Precision Instruments if a serious, entirely modern and practical one exists.

Thanking you cordially,
Arthur Rimbaud

3 october

1 - 1 - 2 - 3 - 5 - 8 - 13 - 21 - 34 - 55 - 89

10 december

They would cross the river by the new bridge, turn right or left, in ten minutes be lost. So the duration of the walks would be decided by the amount of time it took to find a way back, and the places seen would depend on chance. There was always the hope that they might pass the main railroad station where black market cigarettes were sold, or the theater whose roof opened at each intermission, and sometimes they did.

He thought he could hear her if she called from the next room.

The beginning or first instruction must have been 'to find a story not to tell.' And later that 'it should move like speaking.'

11 december, again

The heroine will become undone, softly
filtered
light collects to one place

an arrangement of squares
on which the articles are to be placed
for inspection: one

copy of Unnatural Acts and the hand
recovered from the bottom of the sea;
a gin and lime, the Bruckner

quartet
shows it's torch. No mind left
to make up

but a full life to look back on
So the squares
slightly shifted

would lose no interest
in themselves, his camera
pointing at them

adjusted for black
against pale brown, the speakers
are difficult to hear

11 december, again

This is your first lesson
and nothing is remembered

of elaborate exclamations
about the spine Not straight enough

or a little too much
or simply watch out

So-and-so removes his hands
the better to wash his feet

objectively. Warm water
from above our bent necks

not your neck and my neck
but his necks and their head

in particular, the completely
serious way the summer days

come to be called summer nights
and/or vice versa. How the minutes

and hours are organized
into hopeful clusters

running from smell to touch
to seconds to go. Tentative plans

for a trip by boat
through the canal. Wide-brimmed palm-fiber

hats, not his-and-her necks
but the sensation of ribbons

bisymmetrical, iconically candid
and heraldic. Not possible.

11 december, again

Earliest memory: we're sitting in a room and standing in one room. Bob and I are claiming this corner. Jane says things which stop other people from talking, the result of her color. John says that with one less leg he is finally able to walk, the trick being not to worry, the trick being not to drink coffee. I explain why my trousers are green, to Bob who reminds me that they're grey with only the possibility of green on a wide, level beach. The girl with the color agrees.

12 december

He would correct the right notes in order to get them wrong.

14 december

Tones you would shape it toward, notes that right would make them wrong, standing and falling as another might decide in

air above gathered clouds to leave no mark. To make nothing of an hour measured by the arm's own time, walks to turn in place, runs to stop. Alchemical emptiness would pour out.

Most often remembering nothing. Is welcome. A lizard in stone or crossing stone, wall following ground, oval mouth to signal regret. Words lost will return by design.

Through the propositions, like Robert's, for love to stand perilously, where blood flows to watch, no possible instruction, no things to set right.

19 december

We're no longer used to the cold.

Earliest memory: he says it will be cold and she disagrees. He goes out late with the Irishman from Iceland, leaving her alone. It's necessary to work in a room without windows and seem slightly taller (taller than others and taller than you are). Older ones can be caught up to and thieves are frequently punished. I will he says tell you a story. At night sometimes the pipes break, this is like a city, should someone's brother die.

20 december

He explained to her that it wasn't snow falling and she turned twice in the air, it never gets dark only a little too hot.

She explained that when they couldn't quite do it it was better, it was entirely possible and someone gets older which isn't called walking from place to place. Or the waters of the Hudson, 'clear blue and wonderful to taste.'

Because of the war she turned twice in the air. Because of the war she turned twice in eight years.

21 december

Possible first names for poets: Cesar, August, Octavio, Miguel, Giovanni, Edouard, Theresa, Rainer, Eugenio, Gerhardt, Marcelline.

A curved edge to that shadow such that it talks with itself. As when you hand it across saying here it is, here is this, here, this is part of it, the head actually turns. Here this is and a door to hold open then partly close. Is here the head actually turns will you listen: long ago in the desert of Arabia lived many great chieftains.

They gather to discuss the piano's price.

26 december

Learning the minutes of that space the back curves to it joined by one other.

Stopping here and here ground will be covered.

As in where to begin, corner along edge to center, always off-center, feet cross to make you fall as in not to fall, walking sideways then backward as in where is when.

Asks the same question a little hollow as it wasn't once and a perfect circle.

It's easy once you learn how to do it and you will never learn how to do it.

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