

A Long Loving Look at the Real: Hank Lazer's *field recordings of mind in morning* (BlazeVox 2021)



Norman Fischer

I've followed Hank Lazer's work since he began publishing poems more than three decades ago. His work rhymes with and informs my own in many ways (we share similar backgrounds, affiliations, sensibilities, communities, commitments) so reading, thinking, and writing about it is a pleasure, a mirror, and an education for me. Sitting down to review *field recordings of mind in morning*, his 18th major collection (it reads effortlessly, emotionally — more on this later), I was stopped, suddenly, by an image in my mind — almost a shape, maybe a feeling — of the arc of Hank's work over time, and how this present book fits into, perhaps completes (there's no completion, of course, we are all always left mid-air) this arc. So I pulled all his books off my shelf — there are many— and could not stop myself from engaging in the very lengthy (and absorbing) task of looking at them all, to recall where Hank has been these many years.

Where has he been? Engaged in as close and thoughtful a consideration of the poem's many formal possibilities as anyone in this period has been. What can a poem do, where can it go, what can it express?— how it can, just maybe, save us.

Poetry has been Hank's profession. As a (now retired)

professor of literature at the University of Alabama, and as co-editor (with Charles Bernstein) of an important poetics series from that University's Press (Modern and Contemporary Poetics Series) and as the author, himself, of three volumes of criticism (*Opposing Poetries, Volumes One and Two; Lyric and Spirit*), Hank has been fully engaged in the Discussion these many years, *thinking about* poetry carefully and strategically for a long time. Thinking that has been guiding the very conscious and careful making of his work over the decades. This fact, however, stands beside Hank's long-standing interest in improvisation, of following threads that appear in his work often by chance. So he's thinking through, but, at the same time, meandering. A sweet combination.

Here I will sketch out some salient notes, high points, tendencies, to appreciate more fully the context in which this current book is embedded — not only because Hank is an important writer worth such consideration, but also because his aesthetic choices over a lifetime of writing are emblematic of the poetics of his (my) generation of writers, or, at least, those of us who have been involved with what we have by now come to call “innovative” poetries.

His first major collection *Doublespace (Poems 1971-1989)* literally occupies two spaces, as exemplified by its cover image, the side by side ordering of two paintings, one a realistic portrait of a man wearing a red beret; the other a surrealist Susan Bee composition of, apparently, two oddly shaped vases in communion: in other words, ordinary lyric realism, on the one hand, and, on the other... something else. Physically, the book actually is two books in one — back to back books, the first running conventionally from first page to last; the second beginning at the end of the volume, and working backwards toward the middle, which is the end of the first book. The first and earlier book occupies the aesthetic space of the conventional modern personal lyric poem, in which the speaker, ‘I’, recounts his feelings and thoughts within the sphere of the ordinary shared world, which consists of memories, locations, emotions, events etc. The second, later, book occupies, quite disjunctly, the space of the experimental poem — long works built on fractured forms, often using quotation and other sorts of materials, programmatic in various ways— leaving ‘I’ far behind to examine writing itself and the various overlooked possibilities it might be discovered to contain. Both these books are, each in its distinctive

way, quite good. Reading Hank all these years I had all but forgotten that he began as a more or less conventional lyric poet, and that he was really good in that form! And that his experimentalism, that eventually became deliberate, controlled, and grounded, and then later quite minimalist, was, in the beginning, wild and energetic.

It is obvious that from here things were bound to get more and more interesting. What next?

3 of 10 (1996) is a book of tens. Using various sources (Thoreau's *Journals*, the poetry of Charles Bernstein, Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, etc) Hank presents three long works of ten sections each. Each work presents a different look, a different line form (in the case of 'H's Journal,' sentences are employed), a different compositional strategy. These works, written at the creative height of the Language Movement, express Hank's restless and wide-ranging experimentation with formal possibility.

By *Days* (2002, but written in the mid-1990's) Hank had begun to experiment with strict use of invented poetic forms and writing strategies within the sphere of the serial poem, each of which he would inhabit for years at a time, to see what would come of it. It's quite obvious, when you think about it, that a writing form will produce a particular set of thoughts and considerations: certain thoughts, sentiments, but not others, will come out of, say, the sonnet — thoughts and sentiments that will not come out of the epic. What's said in Creelyesque short stanzas is not what will come out in Ginsbergian breathlessly long open lines. In other words, it is obvious that wherever there is writing there is some literary form (and not only various iterations of the poem: the letter, the informal diary etc., are literary forms that produce their own specific caches of content) and that that form will condition what can be said. So that the writer is, in effect, not writing what she wants to write: the form of the writing dictates what can be said, and, therefore, who the person is, within that form. Given this, it makes sense to consider what might happen when you invent a form that has never been seen before, and stay with that form for a year or maybe several years. What will you say? Who will you be? What will happen? This was the proposition Hank worked with for many decades.

Days is made of brief, short-lined poems, with lots of white space between the lines, each poem dated, and improvised in various ways, sometimes with a kind of narrative connective,

sometimes without, but lively, and, oddly, somehow, within a context of linguistic experimentation and fragmentation, emotional. In these poems Hank begins the practice, that he will expand spectacularly later on, of handwritten notation — in *Days* the date of each poem is handwritten, and there are from time to time handwritten notations, marginalia, crossings-out and substitutions, references to readings of other works, etc. Hank has always been self-conscious about his work, and has written about it extensively in postscripts to his books, essays, and interviews. In a note at the end of this text Hank writes, “The series of poems also required that I think about the inherent conflict between the selectivity and intensified focus of the lyrical as opposed to the less decisive, unremarkable gradations of the daily. As a phenomenology of dailiness, I consider *Days* to be a kind of lyrical counterpart to Stein’s more monumental representation of gradual temporal modulation in *The Making of Americans*.”

This ‘phenomenology of dailiness,’ about which I’ll have more to say below, is the ruling characteristic of *field recordings* also, and many other of Hank’s projects, from this point on, and constitutes the main thrust of his work as a whole. I find this challenging and interesting: that if your project is the recording (as in ‘field recordings’) of life in time, in words, in thinking, living, perceiving, below the level of the personality and its external adventures per se, then not everything you must set down will have the intensity, punch, and literary tidiness expected of poetry. So your poetry will have its ups and downs (like life, closely and honestly perceived) and might often consist of — to quote the Japanese Zen poet Ryokan — ‘poems that are not poems.’ This question of what poetry is and isn’t, and to what extent the non-poem may be the truest poem, if the poem is thought to be a deep reflection, within language, of how reality appears to us, is one that echoes throughout Hank’s work. It’s reflected in the titles of two of his later books (both published in France by Presse University du Rouen and Havre) *Poems Hidden in Plain View* and *Poems That Look Just Like Poems*.

In this sense then, Hank’s work flows upstream. A focus on present moment phenomenology in the writing process not only causes him to violate the dictates of ordinary poetry — as his diction and syntax get, in *Days* and subsequent texts, like “field recordings,”

simpler and simpler, less and less eloquently or startlingly “poetic” — it also causes him to begin to directly engage extra-poetic questions of philosophy, religion and spirituality. In *Elegies & Vacations* (2004), and with the death of his father, Hank’s methodology of programatic writing, which is by now getting closer and closer to the bone, confronts the traumas of loss and tragedy. Do the forms he’s using, that set aside the ordinary lyric “I,” preclude a direct engagement with these necessary human experiences, or can they expand, reintegrate, and magnify? In ‘Death-watch for My Father,’ the series that anchors this volume, Hank answers this question, movingly, in the affirmative. ‘Death Watch’ is an in-the-moment and deeply affecting poem of love and loss, on the ground and personal, whose emotion and care is enhanced and made more real by all the loosening of persona and openings of the poem that the previous work had effected. Reading this long poem one comes to feel that conventional, personal, expressions of grief are in fact more formal and more distanced than we thought. That the very conventionality of such expressions, however brilliant they may be, limit and abstract them from raw humanness.

By *Portions* (2009) the spirituality in Hank’s work becomes more explicit. It’s a twin spirituality, grounded in Judaism and Zen Buddhism, and by no means doctrinaire; and the poems here, sometimes including narrative and anecdote, but fractured and arrested by the predetermined form, reference directly material from those traditions. In the note at the end of the book titled ‘On the Singularity of a Repeated Form,’ Hank explains that the form of the book comes from the tradition of the *parsha* (portion), the weekly reading of the Torah in synagogues: the Torah (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, one portion read each week on a yearly cycle (a few are double portions). He explains that each poem in the series that comprises the book follows this form, 54 words, arranged in six three-words-per-line three-line stanzas; that is, three words per line makes nine words per stanza, times six stanzas per poem = fifty-four words. Further, the books’ overall structure is assembled in eighteens (a mystical Jewish number, which relates to 54, which is $18+18+18$): 18 poems in the first section, 36 in the second, 18 in the third. This strict form, he writes, creates a fresh way of seeing and being in the poem — and that he stayed within the confines of the form for as long as it remained fresh.

Portions is a delightful book to read; its form carries the reader along, and is its own source of pleasure, beyond content. Or, to say this another way, the form shapes the poem's content, bringing to it a music that allows the words to say something other than (in addition to) what they otherwise still do.

After this Hank embarks on a lengthy (this is a hallmark of his poetry — its tenacity — once he decides on a mode he stays with it for years) 'notebooks' project consisting of handwritten texts arranged in shapes (he calls it 'shape writing' — I have written about this in *Jacket2*, 2014) on the page, an improvisational method involving great danger (there can't be any rewriting, first stroke of the pen is the only stroke possible) and, apparently, great pleasure. The works are various over a number of published texts, depending on the size and shapes of the notebooks he is using, the pens he employs (a few are done with calligraphy brushes, which makes the words large and few) and the texts he is quoting, from his reading, as the poems proceed in daily dialog with the texts (several use Heidegger's *Being and Time* others quote works by Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Zen Master Eihei Dogen). My shelf includes six titles in this series, including *Thinking in Jewish(N20)* (2018), *Evidence of Being Here (N27)* (2018), and *Slowly Becoming Awake* (2019).

While I haven't mentioned this above, place is a feature throughout all these works, from *Days* on. For forty years Hank has lived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the launchpad for his many travels around the world, so that many of the poems are set in various places, from China to Cuba to Hawaii — as well as Alabama. Hanks' two most recent books have come out since the pandemic began — *Covid-19 Sutras* and the present *field recordings. Covid-19* was written while sheltering in place, some years after Hank acquired a family farm near his home in town, to which he repairs frequently for reading and writing; while *field recordings* was published later, it was written first, before the pandemic, but, like *Covid-19*, also very much quietly in place at Duncan Farms. These new works more intensely continue the practice of dailiness begun in *Days* and continuing through the shape-writing, but here in more conventional poems, printed on the page. Both books have the flavor of the serenity that one might expect from a daily writing practice, performed early in the morning, after meditation (field recordings of mind *in morning*). The poems reflect the mind's progress of thinking, musing, singing,

within, and accompanied by, language's own encumbrances and freedoms. In the *Covid19 Sutras* we have, as you'd expect, musings about this very odd era we still seem to be in midst of. The poems track the lunacy of public policy during the pandemic's first year, with the orange guy's many dangerous oddball pronouncements, and Hank's dismay in their face — as the days go by and birds come and go at bird feeders. The poems are written in Hank's accustomed programmatic fashion, 12 lines each, in three four line stanzas. *Covid19 Sutras* was published almost immediately after it was written, in late 2020 (so unusual, almost unheard of, in small publishing world in which delays of several years are common, a shout out to Bill Lavender at Lavender Ink Press for managing this, and also for publishing several other Hank titles).

Now here, close on its heels, we've got *field recordings of mind in morning*, a text that, I am arguing, represents the compositional horizon toward which Hank's work, through its many surprising, and yet not surprising, developments, has been heading these many years: a pure and simple poetry of the moment, improvisational, sincere, personal, contemplative, wise, and consciously rooted in its own language, written in loose and easy verse forms, that do not follow, this time, any set pattern but seem to move as the moment moves.

Here a word about the Zen Buddhism both Hank and I practice (and have often practiced together). It involves the disciplined practice of silence — a meditation practice in which the mind is anchored in the breath and the facticity of the experience of embodiment, so that thought, if it's present, comes and goes, without being directed. Such practice opens the mind to all acts of perception and thought, loosening the grip that personal interest usually maintains, so that there's a sense of floating, open curiosity (no accident, the reading of Merleau-Ponty) and one can dwell within reality with a sense of fluidity, without need of shaping it too much, but, instead, listening to it, being sung to by it: an ideally fruitful preparation of the mind for improvisation. (No wonder that post-war jazz improvisers and their associated cohort — Beat writers and avant-garde poets, painters, musicians: think John Cage, Jackson MacLow — had Zen ideas frequently on their minds, and some of them actually practiced Zen). In the specific case of language, the Zen-shaped mind can't

help but notice that when writing words the main experience isn't the memory, notion, or perception written about, but, rather, the immediate act of writing words itself. The experience of a word in the mind (in the pen, on the page or screen, suddenly, when a moment before it wasn't there) is as stunning and baffling as any other perception, occurring to eye or ear — and even more astonishing for its extra condition of abstraction.

Oddly, poetry, traditionally, takes words for granted: it starts with words as given, proceeds from there to employ words to express thought, feeling and perception, usually in manipulative ways (called 'skill'). Words really are *given*. To practice Zen, as a writer, is to appreciate this fact, and, perhaps, to bring it to center stage for the writing. This, I submit, is what is going on in *field recordings* as much as, and, even more, than in the earlier works. In one of his notes Hank writes of his disappointment at having, after all the experimentation, especially in the shape-writing works, returned to a simple ordinary straightforward, even didactic poem — but that he was compelled to do it, he couldn't help it. But, for my money, this return isn't a return to the place where he left off. This writing, as I say, comes as a kind of quiet settling on the heels of the lifetime of disciplined and thoughtful experimentation Hank has been practicing with poetic form, and is conditioned by that. But it is not without its precedents within the American tradition. I think of the Robert Creeley of *Pieces* (1969):

As real as thinking
Wonders created
By the possibility —

forms.

....

Things
 come and go
Then
 let them.

....

Or the writing of Larry Eigner — the language itself looking back at itself in the process of accessing a world that’s both inside and outside at the same time (isn’t the world as we know it, anyway, always both inside and outside — but most writing misses this fact).

birds

hunted sky
make the world one

mass it streets
color
if
nearly bare

as the earth should slow tilting the

season of whitening storm...

(Eigner, *Collected Vol III* [December 30, 1967])

I also think of Philip Whalen’s description of his work as a “continuous nerve movie.” Like Hank’s, (since *Days*, and Eigner, throughout his work) all Whalen’s poems are dated, as if to indicate that what you see here isn’t to be taken as a timeless work of art but, rather, the momentary record of a mind in motion at a specific place and time.

Field notes is Hank’s writing hand and mind at home at Duncan Farms, with his three boykin spaniels, Walt, Emmie and Nate, in the early morning, writing and reading after meditation in surround of fog, mist, rain, deer, cows, trees, birds, stars, hay bales...

down a long

gravel road

a quiet farm house

early morning

saturated hillside

the dogs run through

(p59, 7/5/28 Duncan Farm)

but, especially, thinking through the moment of composition:

rescued into quiet

a return *teshuvah*

in a place

adequate unto

itself thinking

always in the

middle of things

being part of an

ongoing conversation

thinking itself one of the

many invisible things

a final tendency

toward silence

“As it does not dry up, a pillar conceives a child; a lantern faces a lantern.” <630>

(4/29/18 Carrollton)

This poem (reproduced here in entirety) appears on page 40 of the text. ‘Teshuvah’ in the second line is a Hebrew word often translated

as ‘repentance,’ but in fact meaning ‘return,’ in the special sense of returning to God, coming back after having strayed into the world, having been caught up by the world, which is what Hank does in this and all the volume’s poems — he comes back, to the center, to the moment, the sacred moment of composition — to the poem. Note here how the sparseness of the words and the artful use of space between them makes the poem — the words per se without the spaces would mean far less. The spaces slow the words to the speed of contemplative thought, that is, thought that can think itself thinking, and this magnifies each word, so it’s slower, more poignant in and of itself, without need for ‘poetic’ elaboration. Just the words themselves, as miracles in and of themselves. Thought that, as the poem so simply states, is always part of a ‘conversation,’ thought that is invisibly tending toward silence. The appended quotation at the end of the poem is from Dogen’s masterwork *Shobogenzo*, which seems to say, in the context of the poem, that every word is beyond itself.

The poems in *field recordings* are not pastoral hymns to the goodness of being alive in the rural South amid fields and under skies: well, they are, wonderfully, that, but they certainly take into account the depth of time itself, as well as the tragedies of the times, with a lovely calmness that accepts the worst, as, in itself, part of the beauty of the day:

so that after our greed &

self-importance have

played themselves out

this rich fertile

profoundly particular

sphere returns to

its orbital way

in no time

we were

an entertaining

violent

short-sighted

interruption

(5/13/18 Carrollton)

. . .and, these poems say, we are not the only ones occupying this moment and this world-stage; the others here with us may have more to offer:

the trees

know

exactly

what to do

(P 77)

(Poem here reproduced in larger type as in the text)

I've long had the idea (from the place where I am standing, sitting, in the world) that the only way we get through the current catastrophe of our over-heated and agitated time is with a perspective wider or deeper than, other than, this world as most of us conceive it. Such an essentially transcendent perspective is usually called 'religious' or 'spiritual', and it is that, but these words, with long overuse, and with the sense of burden they've carried over this last secular materialistic century of modernity, don't quite capture

it. But whatever you call it, *field recordings* certainly expresses it:

“Without reverence, there is no taking refuge.” <839>

i had not realized all

along this writing was

moving toward something

perhaps it is an

extended mystical pathway

to be walked only by

one i had hoped

others would

come along only

time will tell

(P 92,11/10/18, no location noted)

The last of the six sections of *field recordings* is written, in part, in Paris in 2019. Hank’s two previous books, before *field notes* and *Covid 19* were published — as I mentioned above — in France in the “to” series that brought out books by contemporary American innovative poets in twin simultaneous French and English volumes. Hank was writing these *field notes* poems in Paris, likely for events having to do with the publication of these volumes.

The 3/16/19 entry contains these lines:

today I awaken & my heart is full

before the city awakens before the light embraces the heavy
buildings

today I awaken & my heart is full

with the pain of the thousands of names on the shoah memorial wall

today I awaken & my heart is full

for a quiet time a rest in time this sabbath time

today I awaken & my heart is full

And, from the penultimate poem:

shopping at the farmers market

we read

& we write

it is

a trail a

way that we

take with us

wherever we are

poet

is a

contemplative space

leave us alone

& you can bet

it will happen

or

perhaps in the

long run

it amounts to

a way

through

(P 117 3/16/19 Paris)

As I've noted, Hank has commented extensively on his own work in various fore- and afterwords, essays, and interviews, always making clear, in kind consideration of his readers, his intentions and methods. In the short "notes" at the end of *field notes* he explains how he transitioned from the long years of strict programmed forms, through the years of shape writing, to the form of the present volume:

"This is one of the great joys of writing: that we can be doing one thing, with full intent and deep engagement, and yet something else entirely different may be taking place without the writer having the least awareness of it. Perhaps, at times, shape-writing for me had been, unbeknownst to me, simply a way to get the writing done initially. Perhaps it was a disguise and a release, a necessary way of keeping my vision & mind off to the side of what I was doing. Perhaps if my initial writing had from the beginning been required to look like "real" poems (left-justified), I would not have had the courage or self-confidence to write these poems?"

A friend of mine, Rhonda Magee, who's written a recent book called *The Inner Work of Racial Justice*, that uses a contemplative perspective to look deeply at the tragedy of race in America, says that her notion of contemplation comes from a Jesuit priest she knows, who defines contemplation as "a long loving look at the real." A long loving look at the real through words as shaped by the poetic tradition and the poetic process, a look that amounts to "a way through." A good lens through which to appreciate Hank's ongoing work, and the work in *field recordings*.

Coda:

I haven't mentioned the many collaborations Hank's been involved in over the years of his exploration, with visual artists, dancers, filmmakers, and musicians. The "notes" section at the end of *field recordings* lists the several musical collaborations he's engaged in with saxophonists, flutists, guitarists, percussionists, and a full choir. For the specific works in *field notes* he collaborated with the banjo player Holland Hobson. A link is provided in the book for the reader to purchase the album of poem/banjo recordings. These works do enhance the reader's experience of the poems — especially those cuts in which only a few repeated words are used, with lots of wordless space filled in with improvised banjo tunes. The banjo, of course, evokes the place, Duncan Farm, in rural Alabama, where the poems were written. Hobson's improvised playing is as quiet and lovely as the poems they accompany.