

O



LESLIE SCALAPINO

O

And other poems

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Leslie Scalapino



BERKELEY
SAND DOLLAR
1 9 7 6

This book is dedicated to
VIRGINIA WOOLF

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Acknowledgement is gratefully given
to *Chelsea*, *Boundry 2*, *Spectrum* and
The Open Cell where some of these
poems first appeared.

UP THERE

Up there,
above my head,
the ceiling of my room is
cream-colored.

Just as the under-belly of a fish
fits neatly
to the fish's back,
the ceiling is tapered to the walls
and from
there to the floor of my room.

So it is
that keeping an eye
on my fish's
under-belly,
looking upwards from my bed,
I can see the ceiling
as motionless which in reality
is gliding slowly
slowly (only inches per year)
into a deep atmosphere,
browsing and feeding, feeding and browsing,
as all fish do.

The cream-colored ceiling
of my room
is never full
though it grows fatter
and fatter.

THE WAY I CLEAN UP MY ROOM

is I have my own numbering system. Reorganization of the room into different combinations such as wall and ceiling, or ceiling and woodwork, enables me, without losing the original key, to *string* them on a wire. And if I break open the units on the wire (which are like beads) there are the hard brown grains seen also on the outside of each bead. This is like breaking open bread. Or cutting a pie. Or eating a melon.

VESSELS

I would like to talk about the concept of vessels.

Anything can be a vessel. Take a geranium
in a pot,
for example.

The color
always seems an integral part
of the geranium
but is actually moving and flickering and can pass

from the geranium
into say a chair sitting by the windowsill
or a car
or a man.

That means the geranium is a vessel.

The effect of the vessel
on us
is to fix our minds
on the moving points of color
residing in the geranium.
We become infected and heavy.

The geranium appears to be pure and shimmering.
This is a mirage, though.

IT

Some of the qualities of air are the following:

A large fish tank will induce

the body of your goldfish
to grow
to fit the sides of the tank.

And air operates on the same principle.

Air

can congregate in one corner
of the room
leaving the inhabitant of the room to suffocate.

And air is more watery in morning
than in afternoon
when we are not aware

of what is beyond or inside the air.

This is what I call "it".

It can be seen only in the morning when air
has spread thin
in order to cover everything

— leaving the possibility
that in afternoon there is a vulnerable spot
somewhere
which has not been covered.
To find this spot then is our constant obsession.

O

Whether my arms floated on the surface of the water
of the swimming pool
or beat
slowly back to my side,

I always
uttered the same O, delivered in a monotone, each O
having the same value.
O, I said after a regular interval. Then O. O.

This had happened
by my standing waist-deep in the swimming pool looking
down at the watery half
of my body
and then
slowly allowing myself, by sinking, more flat sounding
O's.

I was alert, not lulled
by the water,
But my limbs
dislodged and then fluttered out from my body.
My bathing suit began to fill.

THE SIGHTS I SAW

The sights I saw were all concerned
in some plot, some adventure, some escape

that was changing incessantly.

I lay

in the grass that day.

There was an airplane
which divided the sky above me
into different levels.

When I looked up
the moter was invisible —
only a faint booming sound
that rippled over the sky.

But under this ripple
grass and sky
were passive. While I,
who was caught up in a new adventure
(talking unintelligibly)
made constant maneuvers.
Now I was flying and jumping,
now soaring,
and now falling under the booming, curling sound
of the moter into the bottom of the sea.

The moter hummed steadily, softly, almost lovingly.

THE ROOM

It started when I noticed how forgetful
I was becoming,
how many things were wrong, he said.
And I started to leave my room (when I went out)
as if to catch something
that I knew would slip through
if I wasn't very careful.

So I arranged the bed to run east and west
whereas the length of the room ran north
and south.
I noticed this although other people wouldn't.
One chair
was at the desk, and the other chair
faced the window.

Despite the noise of traffic
outside,
soon the room became so real to me it was
as if the grains
in the boards were alive,
and the brushstrokes on the walls and woodwork
were alive.

"Now I will enter", I thought, fearing however
that I would never relax, that the room itself
would always be without me.

THE SHOOTING SOUND

First the shooting sound
of the sprinklers.
(I sit up in bed one morning to listen).
They are watering the grass outside.

I don't
get up then, however.
I lie
watching a fly circling the ceiling of my room.
The fly lights on my windowstill.

One morning I listen to people's words
as they fly
up to me in my room.
Words
fall down on me like a pattern on the sidewalk
when people walk by.

Flying, they say.
talking about flying.
(I worry,
I squeeze the meaning under its surface).
Racing, they say.
Racing, gliding, they say.
Falling, flying.

Floating, they say.
Gliding, flying, floating, floating, flying.

WHISTLER

I wanted to be a champion whistler.

As an exercise I decided to capture in whistling
the buzz of a fly.

This is difficult because I could pay no attention
to the tune
but mimicked the stumbling of the fly from one key
to another.

At first it was necessary to whistle only scrambled
notes

and often these were shrill and painful
or very low
(the exact buzz impossible to render).

But finally I succeeded in a facsimile.

What's that noise? people asked me
at first annoyed as I sat whistling on the living
room sofa
or broke into a whistle at the breakfast table.

They recalled something
however distant.

It's the sound of the buzz of the fly, I said.

CURIOSITY

Whenever I get a package of M & M's
I separate the candies into different colors.

Seriously. My favorites
are the light colored brown ones
which I save for last.
I separate the green, orange, dark brown
and yellow
candies. And one red one.

The red one, being ugly,
I eat first.
Then I concentrate on the orange
and dark brown candies
and last of all
on the green, yellow, and light brown candies.

Usually this choice is routine.
But last time
I thought
What if I save the yellow ones for last?

Yellow, which had seemed so *brutal* before,
ugly
not at all cheerful, to *my* mind led nowhere.
But I have seen it everywhere!

And I remembered all of my struggles
up to several years ago.
One thing. I had never understood color before.

SAVED

for Stephen Elrick

I hear you in the kitchen making a salad.

As you throw the ingredients of the salad
into a bowl,

I hear you say that you are chopping up a few
onions;

or that

you are ripping off and tearing apart a first
and then a second
lettuce leaf.

It is not only the naming of each lettuce leaf
that is necessary;

but the filling up of the void in the kitchen
with the sound of your voice.

You are conscious of moving from the sink
to the cutting board:

albeit some of the actions you name
will begin to encroach on and crowd out other
actions
in your brain.

HE

He, continuously traveling,
had by then
boarded another ship,
had taken off
in another airplane

on an ocean, flying over a desert
over Khartoum. Khartoum
was 110 degrees
at midnight,
the airplanes whining on the runway.

While he was thinking
in desperation
how he would send a letter 10,000 miles,

you, at the same time,
(though he didn't know you)
were growing up and reading the newspaper.

He was at that airport in 1958.
He was at this other airport in 1960.

But he didn't send his letter.
You never received it.

ALTHOUGH

Although we are looking at each other
and I am trying to tell you something,
all I can hear is my voice
which is either too high or too low
and which is falling
and rising
as if it were caught in the onslaught
or the wake of ripples and waves.

The advancing dark wave that
crosses your face means
that you believe me, or you disagree, or
agree with me.

The advancing dark wave that crosses your face
means you are becoming a mountain, a rock,
or a flat desert
with the sand whirling across it.

“I’m sorry”, I tell you. Or I tell you
I understand your question, or
I don’t understand your question. Or I tell you
nothing could be more difficult.

HMMMM

I took out my exercise book, he said,

and listened to the teacher
as she recited the correct answers.

I began to spit on each of the correct answers.
Since we were not allowed
pencils
on our desks
and the spit dried as soon as
it hit the page

I was forced to spit over and over again.
Suddenly the teacher
pointing to me
asked
for the correct answer.
The spit
had dried again
so I had to think fast.
I *had* to think for myself.

I put my nose
down to the page
and began dabbing my tongue on the page.

STRANGELY

Strangely it was her body that opened
the contents of brain. And he had intercourse
exactly as a man raids the cells of a bee hive,
silent and intent, the woman silent also
The bees worked inside her head.

ENTENTE

Our teeth
make short work

of these tender
backs. The brain,
everything, devoured.

Like a King and Queen

who sit down
to each other.
When the gift
is opened
all we can say
is O

STRAWBERRIES

You even said no
you'd never been unhappy.
There's knowledge
 and one's needs:
the two are not together.
But those summer days
there was no wind as we lounged

or picked on our knees in the dirt.
We loaded our boxes
with strawberries

until our eyes
were hurt by their red color.
The air and our hands
and the hillside turned red.
It was indelible.
The road and fields fused.

WATER

A Poem for Virginia Woolf

No one to hear me: those warnings
coming by strange absences.
(The gnats stirring in the air)

I was listening for something:

The first waves.
A furnace mounting behind the sky —

Knowing then that not only the “I”
had vanished.
There was no audience. No echo

Only the arc of water, masses
swelling under us. The ache inside
Nothing else.

SAND DOLLAR / 21

Designed and printed by Wesley Tanner,
Berkeley, in an edition of 376 copies during
the winter of 1976. Twenty-six copies are on
Basingwerk paper and are signed & lettered
by the poet.

