

Crows Written on the Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies

Gerald Vizenor

Vizenor, G. (1987). *Crows written on the poplars: Autocritical autobiographies*. In B. Swann & A. Krupat, *I tell you now* (pp. 99-110). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

One can say anything to language. This is why it is a listener, closer to us than
any silence or any god.

John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

Each autobiographical utterance embalms the author in his own prose, marking his passage into a form that both surrenders him to death and yet preserves his name, acts, and words. - Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography*

This is a mixedblood autobiographical causerie and a narrative on the slow death of a common red squirrel. The first and third person personas are me.

Gerald Vizenor believes that autobiographies are imaginative histories; a remembrance past the barriers; wild pastimes over the pronouns. Outside the benchmarks the ones to be in written memoirs are neither sentimental nor ideological; mixedbloods loosen the seams in the shrouds of identities. Institutional time, he contends, belies our personal memories, imagination, and consciousness.

Language is a listener, imagination is a mythic listener, he pleaded and then waited for the light to mm green at the intersection. Imagination is a presence, our being in a sound, a word; noise, ownership, and delusions remain, the material realm reduced to scenes on color television in the back seat of a white limousine.

"Myth makes truth," wrote Avrom Fleishman, 'in historical as well as in literary autobiography.' Myth makes noise, war, blue chicken, and mixedbloods too, mocked the mixedblood writer. The mixedblood is a new metaphor, he proposed, a transitive contradancer between communal tribal cultures and those material and urban pretensions that counter conservative traditions. The mixedblood wavers in autobiographies; he moves between mythic reservations where tricksters roamed and the cities where his father was murdered.

The Minneapolis Journal reported that 'police sought a giant negro to compare his fingerprints with those on the rifled purse of Clement Vizenor, a twenty-six-year-old half-breed Indian ... found slain yesterday with his head nearly cut off by an eight-inch throat slash.... He was the second member of his family to die under mysterious circumstances within a month.

"Three half-breed Indians were being held by police for questioning as part of the investigation.... Seven negroes were questioned and then given the option of getting out of town Captain Paradeau said he was convinced Clement had been murdered but that robbery was not the motive. The slain youth was reported to have been mild tempered and not in the habit of picking fights. Police learned that he had no debts, and, as far as they could ascertain, no enemies."

Clement William Vizenor was born on the White Earth Reservation. He moved to Minneapolis and became a painter and paperhanger in the new suburbs; he was survived by his mother Alice Beaulieu, his wife LaVerne, three brothers, two sisters, and his son Gerald Robert Vizenor, one year and eight months old.

Bound with mixedblood memories, urban and reservation disharmonies, imagination cruises with the verbs and adverbs now, overturns calendar nouns in wild histories where there are no footholds in material time, no ribbons on the polished fine. The compassionate trickster battens on transitions and listens to squirrels, windlestrat patois, word blossoms on the barbed wire, androgynous rumors in college chapels; the seasons are too short down to the mother sea. The end comes in a pronoun, he roared on an elevator to the basement, birth to death, decided overnight in a given name.

"When we settle into the theater of autobiography," wrote Paul John Eakin in *Fiction in Autobiography*, "what we are ready to believe-and what most autobiographers encourage us to expect-is that the play we witness is a historical one, a largely faithful and unmediated reconstruction of events that took place long ago, whereas in reality the play is that of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness." Here we are once more at the seams with pronouns and imagination in an autumn thunderstorm.

'A good hunter is never competitive,' Vizenor repeated, a scene from his autobiographical stories published in *Growing Up in Minnesota: Ten Writers Remember Their Childhoods*. "The instincts of a survival hunter are measured best when he is alone in the woods. In groups, people depend on each other for identity and security, but alone the hunter must depend on his own instincts of survival and must move with the energy of the woodland."

Survival is imagination, a verbal noun, a transitive word in mixed-blood autobiographies; genealogies, the measured lines in time, place, and dioramas, are never the same in personal memories. Remembrance is a natural current that breaks with the spring tides; the curious imagine a sensual undine on the wash.

Ten years ago he wrote about what he chose to remember from an experience twenty years before that, when he shot and killed a red squirrel. He was alone then, the autumn of his second year of college, his first year at the University of Minnesota; he was single, an army veteran with two volumes of photographs to prove that he had driven a tank, directed

theater productions, survived a typhoon, and walked with the bears in the Imperial National Forest on Hokkaido. When he faced the camera he wore a pensive smile, and at nineteen he had captured two dreams to be a writer.

The sun was warm, the wind was cold, and the oak leaves were hard on the mound behind an abandoned house north of the cities; the ponds where the whole moon had crashed overnight were calm. In the loose seams of his memories he pictured Aiko Okada at Matsushima in Japan; he remembered his lover there, the loneliness that winter, the old women with their cloth bundles on the train back to Sendai. The squirrels whipped their tails and waited four trees back from the mixedblood.

He folded his cold ears and remembered a scene from a movie: Barbara Stanwyck climbed the stairs, opened a door, and shot a man in his bed; and a soldier in the audience at the army theater shouted, "Cease fire, police your brass and move back to the fifty-yard line." The audience roared, he roared with them; now the audience roars in his head and he smiles in the woods.

He praised Kahlil Gibran then, on the train with chickens and maimed warriors, and later in the leaves; he mentioned Lillian Smith in the barracks and repeated a line from her memoir *Killers of the Dream*, "The heart dares not stay away too long from that which hurt it most." He had been accepted at Sophia University in Tokyo, but at the last minute he decided to return home. Who would he be now in his autobiographies, he wondered, if he had stayed in Japan?

He has never been able to tame the interior landscapes of his memories: the back stoop of a tavern where he fed the squirrels, while his grand- father drank in the dark, breaks into the exotic literature of Lafcadio Hearn. Tribal women in sueded shoes mince over the threshold in the translated novels of Yasunari Kawabata and Osamu Dazai. Alice Beaulieu, in her sixties, married a blind man because, she snickered, he said she looked beautiful; and now, in the white birch, their adventures in the suburbs to peddle brooms and brushes overturn the wisdom of modern families-the blind man and his old stunner soothed lonesome women in pastel houses, and no one bought a broom.

Matsuo Basho came to mind on the mound with the squirrels that afternoon. Basho wrote, in his *haibun* travel prose, that the islands at Matsushima "look exactly like parents caressing their children or walk- ing with them arm in arm.... the beauty of the entire scene can only be compared to the most divinely endowed of feminine countenances, and at the same time Vizenor remembered a woman who told him that his haiku were too short; she dismissed those poems that were "less than seventeen proper syllables." She would never understand mixedblood autobiographies.

In the distance he heard laughter and smelled cigarette smoke: a hunter in a duck blind in a marsh behind the mound. Silent crows were on the trees. He pinched the side of his nose, abraded the oil with his thumbnail, and rubbed it into the dark grain of the rifle stock. He remembered laughter on a porch, through an open window, at the river, and snickers deep in the weeds behind the cabins at Silver Lake, a Salvation Army camp for welfare mothers. He had taught their children how to paddle canoes that summer, how to cook on an open fire, and how to name seven birds in flight.

He ordered a laminated miniature of his honorable discharge, bought a used car, a new suit, three shirts, a winter coat, and drove east to visit friends from the army. Two months later he was a college student, by chance, and inspired by the novel *Look Homeward Angel*; his two dreams, and much later his grammars, blossomed when his stories were praised by Eda Lou Walton, his first teacher of writing at New York University.

Professor Walton turned her rings, fingered the chains and beads at her thin neck when he lingered in her office; touched, he must remember that she was touched, even amused by his mixedblood meditations. His manuscripts were scented with her lavender water when she returned them with three unpunctuated phrases: the first a comment on imagination, the second on narrative, and at last a note on usage. "Wild imagination," she wrote on his third manuscript, "the boxelder sap stuck to my fingers ... person and number, horrid grammar." This, the praise and criticism, was a marvelous association because she once shared an office with Thomas Wolfe.

I walked into the woods alone and found a place in the sun against a tree. The animals and birds were waiting in silence for me to pass.... When I opened my eyes, after a short rest, the birds were singing and the squirrels were eating without fear and jumping from tree to tree. I was jumping with them but against them as the hunter.

Here, in the last sentence, he pretends to be an arboreal animal, a romantic weakness; he was neither a hunter nor a tribal witness to the hunt. He was there as a mixedblood writer in a transitive confessional, then and now, in his imaginative autobiographies.

He has been the hunted, to be sure, cornered in wild dreams, and he has pretended to be a hunter in his stories, but he has never lived from the hunt; he has feasted on the bitter thighs of squirrel but he has never had to track an animal to the end, as he would to the last pro- noun in his stories, to feed his families and friends.

He understands the instincts of the survival hunter, enough to mimic them, but the compassion he expresses for the lives of animals arises from imagination and literature; his endurance has never been measured in heart muscles, livers, hides, horns, shared on the trail. His survival is mythic, an imaginative transition, an intellectual predation, deconstructed now in masks and metaphors at the water holes in autobiographies.

"Language is the main instrument of man's refusal to accept the world as it is," wrote George Steiner in *Ajier Babel*. "Ours is the ability, the need, to gainsay or 'un-say' the world, to image and speak it otherwise.... To misinform, to utter less than the truth was to gain a vital edge of space or subsistence. Natural selection would favour the contriver. Folk tales and mythology retain a blurred memory of the evolutionary advantage of mask and misdirection."

I raised my rifle, took aim, and fired at a large red squirrel running across an oak bough. He fell to the ground near the trunk of the tree, bounced once, and started to climb the tree again. The bullet passed through his shoulder, shattering the bone. His right front leg hung limp from torn skin. He fell to the ground and tried to climb the tree again. He instinctively reached up with his shattered paw, but it was not there to hold him. Blood was spreading across his body. He tried to climb the tree again and again to escape from me.

The slow death of the squirrel burned in his memories; he sold his rifles and never hunted animals. Instead, he told stories about squirrels

He was a survivor. He knew when and where to hide from the hunters who came in groups to kill – their harsh energies were burned in the memories of his animal tribe. I was alone. My presence and my intention to kill squirrels were disguised by sleep and camouflaged by me gentle movements in the woods. I did not then know the secret language of squirrels. I did not know their suffering in the brutal world of hunters.

The overbearing hunter learns not to let an animal suffer. As if the hunter were living up to some moral code of tribal warfare, wounded animals must be put out of their miseries.

The squirrels in his autobiographies are mythic redemptions; he remembers their death and absolves an instance of his own separation in the world. The transitive realism is a mask, the blood and broken bones rehearsed in metaphors to dishearten the pretend hunter. He refused to accept the world as a hunter; rather than contrive stories or misinform, he fashioned a blood-soaked mask that he dared the hunter to wear in his autobiographies.

Three decades later he read *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* by John Berger, who wrote that the “opposite of to love is not to hate, but to separate. If love and hate have something in common it is because, in both cases, their energy is that of bringing and holding together – the lover with the loved, the one who hates with the hated. Both passions are tested by separation.” He learned that hunters and squirrels were never opposites; the opposite of both is separation. Both the hunter and the hunted are tested by their separation from the same landscapes. Gainsay the sentimental and decadent hunter to forbear the squirrels in trees and autobiographies.

“I write for myself and strangers,” said Gertrude Stein, a secular oblation that would become the isolation of imaginative writers. The mixedblood autobiographer is a word hunter in transitive memories, not an academic chauffeur in the right lane to opposition; those mixedbloods at the treelines, he warned, are wild word hunters with new metaphors on separation.

When the squirrel started to climb the tree again, I fired one shot at his head. The bullet tore the flesh and fur away from the top of his skull. He fell to the ground still looking at me. In his eyes he wanted to live more than anything I have ever known. I fired a second time at his head. The bullet tore his lower jaw away, exposing his teeth. He looked at me and moved toward the tree again. Blood bubbled from his nostrils when he breathed. I fired again. The bullet shattered his forehead and burst through his left eye. He fell from the tree and watched me with one eye. His breath was slower. In his last eye he wanted to live again, to run free, to hide from me. I knelt beside him, my face next to his bloody head, my eye close to his eye, and begged him to forgive me before he died. I looked around the woods. I felt strange. I was alone. The blood bubbles from his nose grew smaller and disappeared. I moved closer to his eye. Please forgive me, I pleaded in tears. Please live again, I begged him again and again.

"The man who takes delight in thus drawing his own images believes himself worthy of a special interest," wrote Georges Gusdorf in his article "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," translated by James Olney and published in his book *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. "Each of us tends to think of himself as the center of a living space: I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete...."

"This conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. Through most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community.

"It is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not ... exist," wrote Gusdorf. "Autobiography becomes possible only under certain metaphysical pre-conditions. To begin with, at the cost of a cultural revolution, humanity must have emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachers and must have entered into the perilous domain of history. The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future; he has become more aware of differences than similarities."

He blinked at me. His eye still alive. Did his blinking eye mean that he had forgiven me? Please forgive me, I moaned again and again, until my self-pity fell silent in the woods. Not a bird was singing, the leaves were silent. He blinked again. I moved closer to him, stretching my body out on the ground next to him, and ran my hands across his back. The blood was still warm. I wept and watched the last of his good life pass through me in his one remaining eye. I sang a slow song in a low voice without words until it was dark.

"Artistic creation is a struggle with an angel, in which the creator is the more certain of being vanquished since the opponent is still him- self," continued Gusdorf. "He wrestles with his shadow, certain only of never laying hold of it."

Chester Anderson smoked too much when he edited the ten autobiographies that were published in *Growing Up in Minnesota*. Borrowed books and sprouted markers, notes in his winter coat, and the thin manuscript of my thirteen

autobiographical stories returned in a manila envelope smelled of sweet pipe tobacco. The professor lowers one shoulder, as he does when he rides in the wind with a genial smile, and leans closer to listen; no one has been a more sensitive listener.

The crows were written on the poplars that winter when the auto- biographies were published by the University of Minnesota Press. The shadows between metaphors vanished in scheduled seminars; personal memories shivered in the buckram and perished on neap tide phrases; memories were measured and compared in a tournament of pronouns.

A teacher at Macalester College in Saint Paul, an *agent provocateur* in reflexive literature, said that my stories were not true. "These are not believable experiences," she announced in the chapel where several authors had gathered to read. Her haughtiness and peevish leer, broadened behind enormous spectacles, reminded me of a high school teacher who refused to honor one of my stories because, she ruled, an adolescent would not have such experiences.

"Mature speech begins in shared secrecy, in centripetal storage or inventory, in the mutual cognizance of a very few. In the beginning the word was largely a password, granting admission to a nucleus of like speakers. 'Linguistic exogamy' comes later, under compulsion of hostile or collaborative contact with other small groups. We speak first to our- selves, then to those nearest us in kinship and locale. We turn only gradually to the outsider, and we do so with every safeguard of obliqueness, of reservation, of conventional flatness or outright misguidance," wrote George Steiner in *After Babel*. 'At its intimate centre, in the zone of familial or totemic immediacy, our language is most economic of explanation, most dense with intentionality and compacted implication. Streaming outward it thins, losing energy and pressure as it reaches an alien speaker. "

The two dreams to be a writer remain the same as when they were captured in a photograph on a train near Matsushima in northern Japan. The islands there are endowed with 'feminine countenances' and mixed- bloods must hold back some secrets from the alien speakers in the academics.

