

Strange Communion

A big part of my practice // Is being mistaken for a lily

– Ben Lerner

‘I hate flowers,’ quipped Georgia O’Keeffe, who had grown weary of the Freudian interpretations of her work. ‘I paint them because they’re cheaper than models and they don’t move.’ O’Keeffe had started making large-scale paintings of botanical forms during the 1920s, adopting the close-cropped and intensely magnified perspectives she had witnessed in the work of several modernist photographers, notably her friend Paul Strand. There is something mystical about the paintings, intensely bright and flame-like, at times even kaleidoscopic, anticipating something of the psychedelic 1960s. Although she never saw the artist’s work, I’ve often sensed an affinity between O’Keeffe’s flowers and the large-scale canvases of Hilma af Klint, a Swedish mystic whose abstract paintings were produced, she said, under a form of spiritual guidance.

I was reminded of O’Keeffe’s declaration – her ‘hatred’ of flowers – in Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum, whose exhibition *In Bloom: How Plants Changed Our World* ended in August. A curious assortment of artworks, manuscripts, photographs and objects (including several anatomical teaching models of plants made by Robert and Reinhold Brendel at the turn of the twentieth century), the exhibition explored our deep relationship with plants and flowers, from the symbolic resonance of the Garden of Eden and pioneering collections of John Tradescant to the enthusiasms of Dutch *tulpenwoede* (tulip mania) and our apparently insatiable appetite for collecting and classification – one thinks of the hapless poet-turned-amateur-botanist Ezra Chater of Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, who meets his tragicomic end offstage on his inaugural expedition, succumbing to a monkey bite in Martinique.

In Bloom featured a number of botanical paintings, including *Flowers in an Ornamental Vase* (c.1660-79), an anonymous canvas thought to

be inspired by the work of Abraham Mignon. It's a striking example of a Dutch still life, an explosive arrangement of flowers – roses, poppies and carnations; three variegated 'parrot' tulips – which both defy the laws of gravity, climbing high on flimsy stems, and break the fourth-wall of the painting; several specimens appear to loll into the room before us, drooping from the frame, an effect exaggerated by the trompe l'oeil of the stone ledge at the bottom of the picture. According to the exhibition text, the painting shows us an impossible bouquet, plants that flower at different times of year, a testimony 'to the fashion of collecting nature and man's desire to control it'. Whether prompted by this odd impossibility, the painting's uncanny *overabundance*, or by the fact that the flowers depicted are themselves unreal and only pretending to be drawn from life – likely copied from another, slightly different painting by Mignon hanging in the Louvre (or yet another in the Mauritshuis) – I found the painting curiously ugly, difficult to love. Leaving the exhibition, I headed to Gallery 48 of the Ashmolean, which houses the museum's collection of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, to test myself against the other floral paintings in the building, to see if they would prove to be as unappealing as their counterpart.

In his *Colloquia familiaria*, published in 1518, Erasmus writes that 'we are twice pleased when we see a painted flower competing with a living one. In one we admire the artifice of nature, in the other the genius of the painter, in each the goodness of God'. Indeed, the genre of botanical still life originates, anecdotally at least, with a Dutchwoman commissioning an artist to paint a bouquet of rare flowers she could not afford to purchase, implying that if God's original could not be enjoyed – or, more complexly, *bought* and *owned* – then a copy might just do the trick. During the 1630s, at the height of *tulpenwoede*, certain varieties of tulip are estimated to have cost more than the price of average property in Amsterdam. Unsurprisingly, once the new phenomenon of botanical still life was under way, the artists who could fetch the most were those whose work was deemed to most convincingly deceive the eye, presenting painted flowers 'indistinguishable' from nature.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for in the Ashmolean, but I felt the oppressiveness of Gallery 48 almost immediately. The paintings are hung

in ornate frames, mostly two and sometimes three works stacked on top of one another, which makes it difficult to see some pictures without craning to inspect them and generates an effect of excess – not unlike certain of the canvases themselves – perhaps even a kind of glut, a sense that there are too many artworks on display in the room, made all the more frustrating by the ceiling spotlights angled at the paintings, which frequently obscure their contents with a milky sheen. (I know how I sound, here – ‘*Boy, the food at this place is really terrible. ‘Yeah, I know; and such small portions...*’) Of course, there are some beautiful passages of painting in the gallery: Coorte’s famous bundle of ghostly asparagus; Cornelis Kick’s translucent lemon; Jan van Kessel’s miniature arrangements of shells, flowers and insects; there’s even something hypnotic in the powder-blue leaf forms dominating *Vase of Flowers with a Watch* (c. 1642-83), looming from the darkness like an unknown thing from outer space. For the most part, however, the work confirmed what I had felt before – that floral paintings from the Golden Age of Dutch still life are difficult to get along with, that despite moments of technical mastery and flamboyant illusion, there remains a kind of ugliness to what we see, a texture verging on repulsive.

To some extent, this quality is a deliberate condition of the paintings, which are not only depictions of the natural world but expressions of *vanitas*, meditations on the fleetingness of life. This theme is emphasised by the presence of clocks, watches and hourglasses, candle-snuffers, human skulls, objects that can’t help but draw attention to time’s passing. The flower arrangements often carry blemishes and imperfections, too: insect bites and withered leaves, flowerheads drooping and losing their buoyancy, petals dropping to the floor. The fact that the paintings are frozen in time, somehow resisting the very thing that they communicate, only draws attention to their strange unpleasantness-to-look-at. The flowers seem paradoxically dead and alive, greyish and wan despite their Technicolor vibrancy. They remind me of Pip’s first encounter with Miss Havisham, another figure of the living dead. ‘I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago,’ he notes. ‘I knew nothing then of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have

looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust.’ The same seems true of the impossible flowers of Dutch painting: one wrong move and they’ll collapse into a pile of ash.

‘The most beautiful still lifes are never pristine, and herein lies one of their secrets,’ writes Mark Doty in *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, his memoir measuring the delicate parameters of art and grief. ‘They refuse perfection, or rather they assert that this is perfection, this state of being consumed, used up, enjoyed, existing in time.’ For Doty, still life encourages a form of self-awareness, a slowed-down attention to the world that forces us to recognise ourselves as vessels filled with meaning, carrying it forwards. This is impossible, he argues, without ‘Time’s fell hand’ – to nab a phrase from Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 64’ – without acknowledging that everything is subject to a restless ‘interchange of state’, which still life painting paradoxically proves by showing us its opposite, a form of preservation, perseverance. That’s the ‘deep pun hidden in the term’, writes Doty: ‘life after the knowledge of death is, after all, still life.’

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In August 1929, less than a year before he died, D. H. Lawrence published *Pansies*, a collection of disjointed, aphoristic poems that rail against the modern world – an apocalyptic cocktail of the author’s personal philosophies and grievances. (A second volume, *More Pansies*, appeared in 1932, equally cranky and cantankerous.) Explaining the book’s title in a preface, Lawrence draws attention to the transience of flowers. ‘A flower passes, and that perhaps is the best of it,’ he writes. ‘The same with the pansy poems; merely the breath of the moment, and one eternal moment easily contradicting the next eternal moment.’ ‘O flowers they fade because they are moving swiftly,’ read lines from ‘Fidelity’:

a little torrent of life
leaps up to the summit of the stem, gleams, turns over round the bend
of the parabola of curved flight
sinks, and is gone, like a comet curving into the invisible.

Like the comet of this image, ‘curving into the invisible’ there is an undeniable immediacy to the poems in this collection, twisting and darting like ‘Quick little splinters of life,’ the poet writes in ‘Little Fish’. The collection emphasises energy, the now-ness of being alive, responding to the speed and ever-changing shapes of nature, thought and selfhood. As Lawrence puts it elsewhere, slightly less poetically: ‘All that we have, while we live, is life; / and if you don’t live during your life, you are a piece of dung.’

While this mode has brought its critics – ‘more notes for poems than poems themselves,’ suggested T. S. Eliot – Lawrence’s poetry is born of a conviction that the world is never static or unchanging, that life is always on the move, ‘surging itself into utterance at its very well-head,’ he writes in an essay of 1919, in which he advocates for ‘the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present.’ For Lawrence, the idea of fixity in art is a contradiction in terms; art comes from life, he argues, and in life ‘there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished.’ Rather, art should aim to apprehend the energy and spontaneity of the present moment, fizzing with ‘the quality of life itself’. ‘Embalsmed flowers are not flowers,’ he continues in ‘Fidelity’, ‘flowers are just a motion, a swift motion, a coloured gesture; / that is their loveliness.’

Lawrence returns to these ideas often, allowing us to chart the evolution of his thinking. He often reaches for the word ‘contact’ to describe this theory of immediacy, implying physical encounter; he may have linked the term to the American frontier, conjuring images of pioneers ‘making contact’ with indigenous communities. In an essay on New Mexico, published posthumously in 1931, he describes the Native American worldview as one that prioritises ‘immediate *felt* contact’ between man and his environment:

In the oldest religion the whole life-effort of man was to get his life into contact with the elemental life of the cosmos, mountain-life, cloud-life, thunder-life, air-life, earth-life, sun-life. To come into immediate *felt* contact, and so derive energy, power, and a dark sort of joy.

Lawrence arrived in New Mexico in September 1922, quickly finding an alternative to what he felt was an exhausted European culture in the various Native American communities he encountered, whose way of life

was rooted in a profound spiritual connection between the human and the natural worlds. In a peculiar essay – ‘Pan in America’ – unpublished in his lifetime, Lawrence describes his interaction with a monolithic pine tree, ‘woody, enormous, slow but unyielding with life, bristling with acquisitive energy, obscurely radiating some of its great strength.’ ‘It vibrates its presence into my soul,’ he writes, narrating a moment of ‘immediate *felt* contact’, as though communicating with the tree directly: ‘Give me of your power, then, oh tree! And I will give you of mine.’

In 1929, Georgia O’Keeffe spent the summer at the Kiowa Ranch where Lawrence had been resident for several years. The trip resulted in a painting of a monumental pine tree, depicted from below, its inky canopy pushing up against a sky dotted with pinhole stars. While she never met the English writer, O’Keeffe’s work is named after him – *The Lawrence Tree* – a title suggesting less a sense of ownership than one of spiritual communion, perhaps even commingling, as though the tree and man were part of the same entity, a kind of metamorphosis.

Returning to the poetry, we discover Lawrence’s attempts to come into ‘immediate *felt* contact’ with the world around him, to make a record of the present moment – however fleeting or intangible – and so achieve a kind of energy within the lines. ‘Hostile critics have called Lawrence’s poems “sketches”,’ writes Keith Sagar, ‘but a sketch is often superior, in terms of life, to the finished product’:

What he hopes to discover cannot be fixed like a fly in amber. Each poem is exploratory. It does not seek to be gem-like, self-contained, finished [...] It exists in the dimension of time and process, and that is its life. A flower, taken out of time, an immortelle, has form without meaning. A flower in time is part of the process of blooming, seeding, dying and being re-born.

Writing in her memoir, *Not I, But the Wind*, published in 1934, Frieda Weekley describes Lawrence in striking terms. ‘When [he] first found a gentian,’ she writes, recalling their honeymoon of 1912, ‘I remember feeling as if he had a strange communion with it, as if the gentian yielded up its blueness, its very essence, to him.’

In 1923, six years before *Pansies*, Lawrence published *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, a collection of poetry – completed in New Mexico – in which he wrestles with the question of his own relationship to natural things, neither wholly separate from his subjects nor fully able to appreciate or understand them. The poet ‘is not trying to project himself into these creatures,’ writes Joyce Carol Oates in *The Hostile Sun*, ‘nor is he trying, really, to interpret them. They remain alien, brute, essentially unknowable.’ The poems in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* present a kind of transcript, a record of Lawrence’s coming-into-contact with the natural world – what Geoff Dyer has called ‘the shock of his first encounter’. As with the pine tree at Kiowa Ranch, Lawrence very often seems to be attempting to communicate with his subjects, straining to hear a message that he can’t fully make out. ‘Tuscan cypresses, / What is it?’ begins one poem:

Folded in like a dark thought
For which the language is lost,
Tuscan cypresses,
Is there a great secret?
Are our words no good?
 (‘Cypresses’)

Later, in ‘Bare Almond-Trees’, he describes another tree as though it were a huge metal antenna, giving and receiving signals like a ‘telephone’:

Have you a strange electric sensitiveness in your steel tips?
Do you feel the air for electric influences
Like some strange magnetic apparatus?
Do you take in messages, in some strange code,
From heaven’s wolfish, wandering electricity, that prowls so
 constantly round Etna?

In *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, published in 1925, Lawrence returns to his contact theory. ‘How marvelous [sic] is the living relationship between man and his object,’ he exclaims, apparently alluding to his recent poems, ‘be it man or woman, bird, beast, flower or rock or rain:

the exquisite frail moment of pure conjunction, which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless.’ Several paragraphs later, he refers to the pictorial language of petroglyphic art, which he had seen firsthand. ‘The pictures in the cave represent moments of purity,’ he writes. ‘The pure relation between the cave-man and the deer: fifty per cent man, fifty per cent bison, or mammoth, or deer.’ For Lawrence, these artworks propose a paradoxical phenomenon, preserving a ‘moment of pure conjunction’ between the artist and the natural world; they represent a meeting of two life-forces, ‘fifty per cent man, fifty per cent bison,’ and thus retain a kind of energy, a timeless ‘spark’ within a static representation.

Curiously enough, Lawrence illustrates the same idea by way of Vincent van Gogh’s sunflowers, in which the artist ‘reveals, or achieves, the vivid relation between himself, as man, and the sunflower, as sunflower, at that quick moment of time.’ ‘His painting does not represent the sunflower itself,’ continues a passage in ‘Morality and the Novel’, but rather ‘the offspring of the sunflower itself and van Gogh himself [...] the perfected relation.’ For Lawrence, this ‘perfected relation’ – fifty per cent man, fifty per cent sunflower – generates an artwork ‘in the fourth dimension’, simultaneously ‘eternal’ and ‘momentaneous’; *one eternal moment easily contradicting the next eternal moment*, to recall his preface to the ‘pansy poems’. ‘As we live, we are transmitters of life,’ begins another poem in *Pansies*, ‘And when we fail to transmit life, life fails to flow through us’:

And if, as we work, we can transmit life into our work,
life, still more life, rushes into us to compensate, to be ready
and we ripple with life through the days.
 (‘We Are Transmitters’)

Perhaps this is the quality that feels so missing in the Dutch still lifes, in which the flowers on display, for all their vividness and theatricality, their insects and emerging buds, seem far more dead than alive, lacking whatever force convinces us that what we’re seeing is still meaningfully *living*. ‘He seemed to be able to enter into other lives, and not only human lives,’ recalled Jessie Chambers, with whom Lawrence had his first significant romantic relationship:

With wild things, flowers and birds, a rabbit in a snare, the speckled eggs in a hole in the ground he was in primal sympathy – a living vibration passed between him and them, so that I always saw him, in the strictest sense of the word, immortal.

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Re-reading Lawrence's thoughts on cave art and the sunflowers of van Gogh, I was reminded of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's imaginative portraits in which he depicts a range of figures formed of unexpected elements. In his famous painting of Rudolf II, produced in 1591, Arcimboldo's subject is made from fruits and vegetables – his nose a pear, his chest a squash, his eyelids podded peas, and so on. In *Earth and Water*, belonging to his series of the elements, the grotesque forms, depicted in profile, are constructed from chaotic, writhing swarms of mammals and sea creatures. Between 1563 and 1573, Arcimboldo produced a series of four seasons: the figure of *Winter* appears as a gnarled and knotted tree, boasting a crown of interwoven branches; *Spring* is a rosy-cheeked man sporting a green jerkin and formal ruff, his face and head fashioned entirely of blooming flowers.

The Yale Center for British Art houses a manuscript watercolour from the same period. Attributed to Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, a French artist who joined Ribault's expedition to the New World in the 1560s, the illustration shows an elegant woman with a slender spear, her wild blonde hair cascading well beyond her waistline. Strong and serene, she stands tall in a verdant landscape of wooded hills, a hazy settlement behind her. At first glance, she appears to wear a kind of bodysuit, decorated with beautiful, elaborately rendered flowers; on closer inspection, the design turns out to be tattooed directly onto her skin, as if living flowers had been somehow pressed and transferred to her body. Originally believed to be a depiction of an indigenous American, the image is now thought to portray *A Young Daughter of the Picts*, an early inhabitant of the British Isles dating to the medieval period. To my mind, she bears a striking resemblance to another figure, one belonging to the cast of Botticelli's *Primavera* – a graceful woman in a floral gown, her feet crossed in the same position as

the Pict, a flower garland round her neck, more flowers in her hair. Her identity is typically disputed; she either represents Flora, the goddess of flowers, or else a fully transformed vision of Chloris, the nymph kidnapped by Zephyr (seen chasing her into the picture from Stage Left), depicted part-way through her metamorphosis into the embodiment of Spring, a single thread of flowers emanating from her mouth. Like Arcimboldo's vision of spring, both figures – Botticelli's goddess and the daughter of the Picts – embody Lawrence's theory of immediate *felt* contact, 'the perfected relation' between the human and the floral.

In her poem 'Hello, the Roses', Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge relates an instance of her own communion with flowers. 'My soul radially whorls out to the edges of my body, according to the same laws / by which stars shine,' she begins, 'communicating with my body by emanation.' Encountering a rosebush in full bloom, her 'felt sense at seeing the rose extends, because light in the DNA of my cells / receives light frequencies of the flower'. 'The rose communicates instantly with the woman by sight,' she continues, as though suddenly surveying the scene from above, the flower 'collapsing its / boundaries' as 'the woman widens her[s]', their two forms overlapping with 'a feeling of touching and being touched', an 'affinity between awareness and blossom.'

'For a few years, I've been writing poems in which I use the natural environment as a force field and I try to receive frequencies,' the poet has written, echoing Lawrence's language of transmission, 'the same way radio waves and microwaves and light waves in the atmosphere carry content and meaning.' In the same statement, Berssenbrugge describes this aspect of her practice in more detail:

I walk every day from the mesa where I live in New Mexico, and I may notice a plant because of its beautiful seedpods or the way it shines out with the light behind it. The plant is calling me. I begin to think about this plant, and I walk by it several times. I sit next to it. I try to open my heart to the plant. [...] I try to catch the words that are passing through my mind, and as days pass, I realize they come from my plant.

It is as though the poem itself were a collaboration, a ‘collapsing [of] boundaries’, the flower speaking through the poet, the poet listening for the flower. ‘I *wish* you could talk!’ says Alice to a bed of plants in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. ‘We *can* talk,’ insists the Tiger-lily, ‘when there’s anybody worth talking to.’

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Talking flowers are strewn throughout Louise Glück’s sixth collection, *The Wild Iris*, published in 1992. Glück’s poems phase between recipients and voices: flowers address their poet-gardener, who prays in desperation to a nameless god, a god whose voice speaks down (somewhat dispassionately) to its creations. The poet-gardener is struggling, experiencing depression, sensing an ‘imbalance / between the inner and the outer world’, praying for clarity, direction. ‘I’m looking for courage,’ read lines from one of several ‘Matins’, ‘for some evidence / my life will change,’ though the speaker is left wondering whether ‘the point [was] always / to continue without a sign’. ‘Whatever you hoped,’ replies the god, indifferently, ‘you will not find yourselves in the garden, / among the growing plants’:

Your lives are not circular like theirs:
your lives are the bird’s flight
which begins and ends in stillness –
which *begins* and *ends*, in form echoing
this arc from the white birch
to the apple tree.
 (‘Retreating Wind’)

Interspersed between the to-and-fro of this unfolding drama, Glück’s flowers speak themselves into existence, finding not only their voices but a kind of consciousness. ‘You who do not remember / passage from the other world,’ suggests the iris on the collection’s opening page, ‘I tell you I could speak again: whatever / returns from oblivion returns / to find a voice’ (‘The Wild Iris’). ‘I woke up ignorant in a forest,’ speaks another flower, several pages later:

only a moment ago, I didn't know my voice
if one were given me
would be so full of grief, my sentences
like cries strung together.
I didn't even know I felt grief
until that word came, until I felt
rain streaming from me.
("Trillium")

Glück's flowers assert a form of independence, tentatively feeling out for language, discovering it line by line. At the same time, they appear to carry with them something of their histories, an echo of their past lives – which are *circular*, according to their maker – imprinted somehow on their minds, each flower tethered to the others of its species by 'the one continuous line / that binds us to each other' ('End of Winter'). 'I don't need your praise / to survive,' says the defiant voice of 'Witchgrass' to the gardener:

I was here first,
before you were here, before
you ever planted a garden.
And I'll be here when only the sun and moon
are left, and the sea, and the wide field.

I will constitute the field.

Glück's flower poems suggest both a generational continuum – like the trillium, carrying its past grief into the next lifetime – and a glimpse of resurrection or return, as though each flower were not a new plant but the same one that existed previously, emerging newly from the earth, its memory erased. This is a form of reanimation (several plants in *The Wild Iris* speak the language of 'survival') that Glück describes in her essay collection *Proofs & Theories*, in which she writes about the afterlife of poems in terms that sound increasingly familiar:

I thought once that poems were like words inscribed in rock or caught in amber. I thought in these terms so long, so fervently, with such investment in images of preservation and fixity, that the inaccuracies of the metaphor as description of my own experience did not occur to me until very recently. What is left out of these images is the idea of contact, and contact, of the most intimate sort, is what poetry can accomplish. Poems do not endure as objects but as presences. When you read anything worth remembering, you liberate a human voice; you release into the world again a companion spirit.

Reading this passage alongside *The Wild Iris*, I'm reminded of a line by the English novelist Penelope Lively. 'To garden is to elide past, present and future,' she writes, 'a defiance of time.' 'A garden is never just *now*; it suggests yesterday, and tomorrow; it does not allow time its steady progress.' T. S. Eliot's famous lines from 'Burnt Norton' are near at hand – *Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future*, et cetera. – as is another passage from Doty's *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, in which he turns to face the spectral qualities of poetry. 'Where there was a person, a voice,' he writes, 'now there are only lines and images. Where there was a life, now there is form.' But when we read a poem, we activate its energy, breathing 'something of that life out into the world again'. 'It restores a human presence,' Doty continues, 'And so the result is a permanent intimacy; we are brought into relation with the perceptual character, the speaking voice, of someone we probably never knew, someone no one can know now, except in this way.'

In one way or another, this seems true of art in general – or, to risk a self-consuming statement, of art that has some life in it. 'Whatever man makes and makes it live,' writes Lawrence in a clumsy poem, 'lives because of the life put into it'. The sentiment suggests 'life' may be a quality not all made things have in common. When we come into contact with a work of art, we have an opportunity to pick up its transmission, prompting something like a heightened sense of self-awareness of our own lives in the present tense. The American poet Henri Cole finds words for this in his extraordinary 'Extraordinary Geraniums'. 'Eating a sugar sandwich, I

sit at the kitchen table / admiring the geraniums outside the window,' he writes, 'their big heads as American as Martha Washington.' We learn that the poet has grown the plants 'from seeds' and watched their personalities develop – 'they almost have faces'. 'Lately, my vision has been graying a little at the edges,' begins the poem's triumphant descant:

but these geraniums, with their fragrant leaves,
and this gritty sugar sandwich make me feel my whole body
and my whole mind superimposed at once.
It's the opposite of self-obliteration.
If I think, Where am I? I immediately feel, *I am here!*

This is an exercise in total self-awareness – 'the opposite of self-obliteration' – the poet achieving not only a sense of clarity and orientation in the present moment (*I am here!*) but an understanding of the fullness of the self in time and space, an exquisite, frail moment of pure conjunction, which, in the fourth dimension, is timeless. 'It seems that in the moment the final elaboration of oneself is made – when one finally asserts oneself – I am alive and I know it! – the moment expands to its full stature as eternity,' writes Mary Ruefle in *Madness, Rack, and Honey*. 'Call it gibberish, [but] this is what poetry is famous for.'

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[A] living vibration passed between him and them, so that I always saw him, in the strictest sense of the word, immortal. Ben Lerner's *Transcription*, published earlier this year, explores living vibrations, too. It's a novel, or novella, about 'technologies of capture', as the narrator notes at one stage, a phrase referring to the academic subject of his former mentor, Thomas, whose death (and final interview, transcribed by the narrator from memory after he accidentally drops his iPhone in the hotel sink) ties the fiction's disparate strands together. '[I]t is not just mourning that we have been doing but expressing our confidence that his work will radiate out, that it will send its strange signals into the future,' says Rosa at a memorial dinner held for Thomas: 'his voice will continue to speak to and through

us.’ Shortly before her speech, we bear witness to a comic example of this very radiance in action, as ‘a young man from Copenhagen, Christian, who could do a startlingly good impression of Thomas,’ cracks the table up ‘by reading the dessert menu in his voice, as if it were a mysterious text of great antiquity.’

Transcription offers other glimpses of ‘technologies of capture’. During the interview, Thomas describes the radio as a form of ‘recovery’, transmitting ‘the voice without the body’; later, Lerner’s narrator reflects upon the captured light of paintings, noting that it has ‘traveled many years to reach me,’ bearing ‘traces of that transit from the future or the past’. At one stage, Thomas refers to frequencies the human ear is unable to access:

But there is always music playing that we cannot hear: beneath twenty hertz or higher than twenty thousand. We are deaf to the bats singing in ultrasound, or the elephants conversing in their infrasound, slow waves that travel miles and pass through rock. [...] The air is alive with messages. Messengers, angels.

[...]

The question is: Do we have ears to hear?

Lerner uses these examples to investigate ideas of memory, history and their respective unreliability. Thomas’s creeping dementia throws the accuracy of his recollections into question; we are asked to consider whether the narrator’s version of their interview (transcribed from memory) is any less legitimate than statements made in Thomas’s confusion. *Transcription* wonders whether our reliance upon technology, outsourcing our memories to photographs, to data storage in the cloud, reducing our relationships to interactions through a screen, is exclusively deadening or (do we whisper this reluctantly?) occasionally enabling of things that once could only have been dreamed of. Lerner seems interested in testing the boundaries of our definition of ‘technology’, particularly where it touches on the territory of art. What else is a poem or a cave painting, a piece of music or a novel, after all, if not technology of capture?

As if to offer an example, *Transcription* serves an episode from the narrator's time in college, when he accompanies a friend to the Harvard Museum of Natural History, which houses a collection of immaculate glass flowers. 'I was astonished by what I saw,' recalls Lerner's narrator:

I couldn't quite believe that this moth orchid was glass, that this pear blossom was lampwork, that these objects had been blown and shaped and painted, that these impossibly delicate things were the result of a thousand rapid choices and adjustments, movements of the hand.

Standing in the museum, the narrator begins to think of the flowers as receivers, taking in pulsations, fluctuations in the air:

I sensed that the tiny stems and styles and petals surrounding us were vibrating imperceptibly, or maybe just perceptibly, from our footsteps and voices, that the little wires in the models could register even our breath, but also that the specimens were trembling from the exhalations and voices and footsteps of all the people who had ever been in their presence, still vibrating, too, from the journey by boat from Europe [...], vibrating with the street life of Dresden outside the workshop where the father and son sat softening tiny tubes and rods in a jet of flame. The flowers were recording instruments of exquisite sensitivity; their glass anthers captured someone pouring a glass of water, the turning of a page.

Like the tiny stylus of a record player or a seismograph, a wax cylinder or lie detector, the flowers record the life 'of all the people who had ever been in their presence', their data stretching back through time and space – *the one continuous line / that binds us to each other* – to the turn of the twentieth century, where they were created in Dresden by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka. In addition to recording, we sense that the Blaschka's flowers are capable of sending out a signal, too, emitting a transmission, releasing what they hold within them back into the world, activated by the imperceptible vibrations of present. *The question is: Do we have ears to hear?*

To my mind, the flowers of Dutch still life painting don't vibrate with anything. They fail to capture any life, to send 'strange signals into the future,' to recall a line from Rosa's speech. This has something to do with their intended purpose, I feel, to mimic or copy the real, to create a dull facsimile; their commercial impulse seems to deaden them – painted, at least originally, as a substitute for the real thing, the commercial impulse seems to deaden them, an ironic side-effect of their attempts at painstaking verisimilitude. But it's clear that there is something about flowers and plants that artists have been drawn to. Their transience, their cyclicity, their *living*-ness, their beauty? I'm not sure I've decided what, exactly, they communicate, or why they seem to endlessly appeal to poets and visual artists. The simplicity of Blake's lines come to mind, in 'Auguries of Innocence': 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour.' Or perhaps we need to look no further than a single line of Lawrence's, beginning a poem in *Pansies*, a valuable reminder that 'The only reason for living is being fully alive'.