

FrameWork 9/17

Danica Evering on
Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky

CAST

The Guest's Shadow.the invisible pan
The Mountain.a careful yet macho pile
Ahab. thirty-something, a crafty nail
The Wanderer. gauzy, a bit normcore
The Known Universe.a sly constellation
Drying Hanky 1.(non-speaking part)
Drying Hanky 2. Ahab's friend (one line)
Gathering. (chorus) a dry but rotten posse

It is hard not to take them personally. I project lives onto them, making analogies between things we know and other things we know. Affectionate. I wonder if this is a maybe patronizing gesture of empathy, though. Anthropomorphism gives the non-human value by seeing humanity in it. I read somewhere though I forget where, that the problem with this is, it doesn't let us value anything that isn't like ourselves. It denies agency, animating non-human entities according to our own script. This feels unkind.

In his writing about spirituality and art, Jacob Wren discusses Latour and animism. Animism is a something else: the belief that plants and inanimate objects have a soul. (To this end, I think my pagan upbringing probably led to this way-of-seeing). Wren writes, "In its refusal to struggle with the possibility that works of art do have a life of their own – in that we, at times, believe in them, and that this belief can actually make us act, lead us to do or think in ways we would have never otherwise considered – I suspect an opportunity is missed."¹ It is this belief that's important, one that could pull us to do or think differently. Animism or anthropomorphism: I'm not sure if there's really a spirit, inside, or if I'm just projecting.

A doorway's purple man. Plug faces (one eye wider). Hangers like drunk octopuses, dead eyes (XX) and arms raised like a boxer. A fragile train - cousins, line up! Tallest to smallest, allons-y.

SETTING

THE ACTION takes place between two floors, the upstairs and downstairs of a single space. A store and a loft, of sorts. Though it takes place within a frantic city, the space is hushed, almost reverent, a secure membrane (a shut window, or the puffed moment when an ear plug has fully expanded). The usual: the walls are white. The downstairs: high ceiling, grey concrete floor. The upstairs: wooden boards. We can see the light from downstairs shining through their gaps like curious windows. A comfortable silence, the chumminess of having been left behind together and then mutually, delightedly, rediscovered.

THE GUEST'S SHADOW falls slithering across the floor, dividing the room but cautiously not so close to the front door as to be trod on (a few feet to the side).

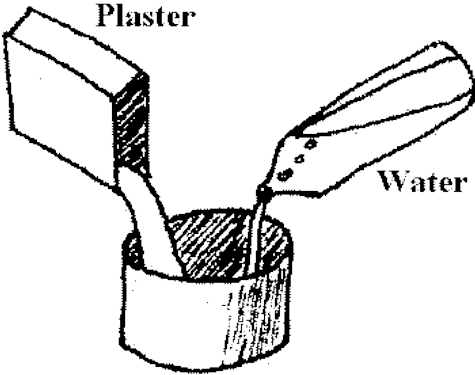
The lights come up on THE KNOWN UNIVERSE crouching, thighs trembling, at the back of the room.

She is resting on glass that isn't there, an unseen bench. She closes her eyes, turns back to her (re)collecting.

Upstairs, THE MOUNTAIN deskspreads. Cardboard papers and folders strewn around and also open file boxes (these too are performatively fragile sad boys: look tough and heavy but also like if you tucked into their handles and yanked they would pull right through). Everywhere is completely sprayed in pigmented gypsum, very matte. He has just erupted. THE MOUNTAIN looks over at the real desk which is also on the top floor. He straightens his back (soft shuffling of paper on paper: zig-zag cardboard vertebrae interlace plump gypsum discs). Copycat, imposter syndrome? He adjusts. Checks his body against the other desk's to make sure he is doing it just so. THE MOUNTAIN opens one of his drawers. Rolls outward, then compensates inward, just a tuck. Always watching. He holds it there, tense. It's not easy.

(DRYING HANKY 1 enters stage left, coughs.)

¹ Jacob Wren, *If our wealth is criminal then let's live with the criminal joy of pirates* (Toronto: BookThug, 2015), 44.



CAST

A pressing matter

(These casts are made by pressing, you know)

An urgent insistence: bubblemailerpessinto
mapintokeyonknottedshoelace(slick click of aglet)²
cardpressintoAT&Tmailerintopostcardintoplayingcardp
aperclipinto the dark window of a slide (all these pull
away, changed.)

The cast is filled with smooth gypsum. The texture is
retained. Creased palm of wrinkled paper, weave of
lace, crispy edge of mailing label. The groove of the key
like a fuller.³ One layer made from many ghosts.

A pressing matter: feminist theoretical physicist Karen
Barad talks about matter (occupying space and having
mass) in relation to mattering (having value). She
writes, “Ethics is about mattering, about taking account
of the entangled materializations of which we are a
part, including new configurations, new subjectivities,
new possibilities—even the smallest cuts matter.”⁴
Ethical relationships are manifest in the knotty
entanglement of our matter, down to the smallest cut.

Each of Weppler and Mahovsky’s *Bindings* is slightly
different: the same mold with an altered cast. Missing
components, different paint. Mirror universes (*in one of
them you were a blue neon circlet, a glowing plastic tube *krik
krik!**)

Each of these is an alternate future, alternate past,
alternate universe. I think of my own pressing, of my
settler relatives pressing (an urgent insistence) into this
land, trying to press our way of being onto its people.
Layers made to look like one layer. The ethics of mattering:
If the smallest cuts matter, how can I change my own
pressing? Each choice feels significant, each insistence,
each reassertion of my playing field. What future do I
press towards?

What matters am I pressing?

SETTING

Gypsum is a sulfate mineral. A softie.
(calcium sulfate dihydrate, $\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) *Fertilizer,*
chalk, wallboard, plaster
Powder mixed with water, crystallizing, reforming,
hardening, slowing finally to set
at the very end of the third day.
(*A setting, a hardening.*)

Aisha Sasha John’s latest book quotes Edmund Jabès
about hardening. “(slowness is a formidable power: it
has the passion of immobility with which it will, some
day, fuse)”⁵. John linebreaks it. She punctuates and
capitalizes otherwise, also: “Slowness is a formidable
power; / It has the passion of immobility / With which
it will someday fuse.”⁶ Jabès’ line is in parenthesis, in
the midst of a sentence about the desert and the
irrevocable refusal of a person to be. Being stuck, as
though in a jail. John’s is in a poem called “When I
leave here I don’t know where I am.” It is the same
sentence. It is in a different setting. Both relate to being
decontextualized. The first is a side note. The second
makes it significant. *Compare and contrast:* the *Bindings* are
a similar kind of difference. The same cast with
different parts cut out. Paint as punctuation—the
sentence, the mold, the form stays the same but the
meaning changes with what’s out around them. In the
setting casts, a slowing,
a passion of immobility
[W]ith which it will[,] some[]day[,] fuse.

Does slowness always fuse with immobility, though?
Is hardening always complete, always and forever? In
order to become plaster gypsum is heated to remove its
water. It turns into powder, ready to be remade as
sculpture. It holds the form it is poured into, slowing to
immobile. Yet if you break it up and heat it, it returns
to powder, waiting again to be reconstituted. This
ambivalence deflects the one-note reading, resists the
mold’s resolution. A hardness that never settles forever.

*What is someday? An asymptote: a curve approaching zero but
tending to infinity.*

² “plastic part of the shoelace called”

³ “blood channel on a sword”

⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke, 2007), 384.

⁵ Edmond Jabès, *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabès Reader*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), 38.

⁶ Aisha Sasha John, *I have to live*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2017), 28.



CAST

Wrap around arm, stick to hair slightly, wrap around dusty skin, around muscle, around flesh, around bone. (Won't you sign it? Here is a pen.)

A cast holds a space for making ready again. cheyanne turions once used this phrase, it has stuck with me: "Holding a space for there not being a right answer."⁷ A container, holding a space for not-knowing. *Skin itches beneath.*

Wrap around kettle, bogle, badge, coin, oilcan, plate, around pan for keys and loose coins.

The objects themselves are long gone, just ghosts now. *The Guest's Shadow* is a ghost, the invisible person revealed by the blanket thrown over them. *Gotcha*. A silenced birdcage, an impression without a body.

Wrap around, slither across cool concrete.

A snake casts its skin two or four times per year.⁸ It leaves its dermis behind to grow and to remove parasites. (*A molting of copper husks.*)

"It was a general belief in the ancient world that snakes don't die of old age like other animals, but periodically shed their skins and emerge renewed or reborn into another life."⁹ These are thrifted items: shed, picked up, remade significant. A transformation, a renewal.

A cast protects. It is the transformative shedding of skin. Yet if we are honest and let's be. How much is this action of throwing yourself over, conforming copper leaf to smooth kettle, is about imitation? *Who Goes There*, the pile of plastered burlap and bendy wire, the one that looks as though it's been at the bottom of the sea, is named after a science fiction novella about the Thing (need we speak of its object-ness?).¹⁰ It is a parasitic alien that consumes other organisms and imitates them. How much of imitation—of appropriation—is about consumption and possession and control?¹¹

SETTING

Inside the cast is dark dark dark. The bone just lies there, setting. It has to. It sits and lets time pass in front of it without reacting. The world tries to get a rise out of it but the bone is like Not today, Satan.¹²

It can't try to do too much too soon. If it acts before it is time, it will break.

Shadows set in the inside of each copper cast. A year ago, thinking about publicness, I spoke with three artists about their work outside: Tina Carlisi (an artist and educator), Dayna McLeod (noted for her leopard-print *Cougar for A Year*), and Émilie Monnet (an actor and performance artist). All of them told me the importance of the inside instead: Monnet of collaborating based on Indigenous worldviews, McLeod of consent-framed queer feminist gallery spaces, and Carlisi of the ideal social space of the art school. It was from this interior—this space they could hold accountable—that they were able to gather energy and support to relay out into patriarchal and colonial public space.

If it acts before it is time, it will break.

Envelopes and other detritus cast a long shadow.

A shadow cast: I have learned from Gregory Sholette's framing of *dark matter*, the missing mass, the generative power of those of us between the art stars—we administrators and failed artists and magazine writers and Sunday painters and professors and activists—that keep the art world afloat. *What would happen if we focus on that dark mass?* he asks, "when the excluded are made visible, when they demand visibility, it is always ultimately a matter of politics and a rethinking of history."¹³ The space inside the copper cast can be generative. We can focus on this invisible and make it seen. But those shadows should be toothy and intentional and questioning.

I am not very good, not really. Sorry.

⁷ cheyanne turions, interview by Danica Evering and Alissa Firth-Eagland, *The Secret Ingredient*, CFRU 93.3 FM, March 26, 2014.

⁸ "how often snakes shed their skin?"

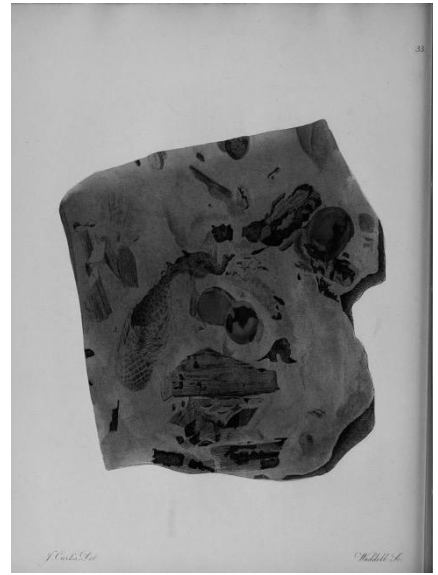
⁹ Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths & Secrets* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 903.

¹⁰ Don A. Stuart, *Who Goes There?* (1938).

¹¹ This appropriation is the subject of Jordan Peele's popular horror film *Get Out*, in which white liberals hypnotize and possess the bodies of black people.

¹² In the immortal words of the wry Bianca del Rio, winner of RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6.

¹³ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Books, 2010), 3.



CAST

A throw

A throe (thrash, thrashing, in death or ecstasy)

Cast is the throwing of pigmented gypsum that drips sticky down the legs of the *The Known Universe*. Breaks the spell of glass that isn't there, leaving a line of beaded nubs along the underbelly of her armature, her every aloe leaf, her doily. Cast is the light of yellow spraypaint in *Who Goes There*, falling on its surfaces, spare parts rusting beneath the water. Over its surface a line unspooling ~~~~~

I hold cast in my mouth and it feels like beginning. Casting: on stitches, our journey. Sara Ahmed has written much on promises and the trickiness of optimism. Ahmed throws out, "I want to turn to the question of hope as a way of reconsidering the temporality of feeling, how feelings are directed toward objects in the present; how they keep the past alive; and how they involve forms of expectancy or anticipation of what follows...I have suggested that the promise of happiness is what makes things promising; the promise is always "ahead" of itself."¹⁴ Hope is a feeling directed at the future, happiness cast out ahead. A happiness that allows us to be okay with unhappiness. Hope that it might one day be different. Later in the chapter, Ahmed reframes hope instead around recognizing the causes of our unhappiness as a political act. The deviant weaves of feminist, queer, and antiracist unhappiness: "If to share deviation is to share what causes unhappiness, even joy, wonder, hope, and love are ways of *living with* rather than *living without* unhappiness."¹⁵ The aspirational happiness thrown down, cast out ahead, turns critically back on itself. Sharing unhappiness with other deviants is its own form of hope. A struggle, a thrashing together.

CASTOUTCASTOUTCASTOUTCASTOUT

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 181.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 196.

SETTING

It was only yesterday

(Cast is a beginning but setting is its end, a thrown stone landing *glup*.)¹⁶

Wepler and Mahovsky play with temporality in *Bindings*. "[T]he moulds themselves we add to and remake to complicate the relationship between a sense of building over time and that of a cohesive instant or moment."¹⁷ Each piece is an alternate possibility (*in one of them you were water-damage and rust and pill bugs spilled from you like a rotten old board*).

Each is hung from the same clip at its top: a bracket, a parenthesis. Open and close, cast and set. A beginning and an end binding together a riotous clutter of choices between.

(*enters stage left, coughs*) Last March I heard Media historian John Durham Peters speak at a conference about technology and temporality. He spoke at the end of a long day, a day where many other people had also spoken about how looping and other digital infrastructures let us become unstuck in time.

Recording, replaying, reliving. "I do not know this," Peters said, "but I suspect: the secondhand is related to our pulse of blood."¹⁸ Because we are born and we die, he reasoned, this basic human experience of the irreversibility of time makes meaning. Each time we play back a video it is new. He went on, this irreversibility makes us compelled to choose. We do not face the impossibility of meaning, but rather that we cannot help but make sense of the decisions we've made. Our beginnings and our eventual ends give us narrative. I do not know how this squares with other less-linear ideas of time. Yet this necessity of meaning (*a clip hangs from a nail*) makes me critical of which (art) histories I perpetuate, which meanings I support. Which riot of envelopes and papers between? Each step is a choice to change the narrative.

(*Sunset*.)

¹⁶ "how to write sound of pebble landing in water"

¹⁷ Trevor Mahovsky, email correspondence to Susan Hobbs and Ella McGeough, September 13, 2017.

¹⁸ John Durham Peters, "The Suspension of Irreversibility: The Fundamental (and Futile) Task of Media," keynote lecture, *Hardwired Temporalities: Technology and the Patterning of Time*, McGill University, Montreal QC, March 11, 2016.