

FEBRUARY		1969
6 Thursday	got up. went to work. came home watched the telly and went to bed.	Sexagesima got up. led watched telly went to bed
7 Friday	got up. went to work. came home. watched telly. went to bed.	got up - w - came home telly - went
8 Saturday	got up.	

THE MAUBERLEY SERIES

AARON KUNIN

The Mauberley Series

Aaron Kunin

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Cover image: from the series "The Lennon Diary 1969." Diary of the future, by John Lennon. Facsimile pocket diary for 1969, written November 1968, published in *Aspen* 7. The full diary can be viewed in UbuWeb's Aspen magazine section, ubu.com/aspen

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NOTE ON METHOD

The series beginning “You won’t remember this” is a translation of Ezra Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” into a severely limited vocabulary of about 170 words. For Pound, “Mauberley” had provided an occasion for disavowing his earlier “aesthetic” work, and also for meditating on the uses of beauty for poetry. It was a way of asking the question: how could Pound write shallow poetry if he were not essentially a shallow person?

My translation is conceived as an inversion of Pound’s psychological experiment. Instead of using “Mauberley” to go outside myself, to gain access to unfamiliar uses of language—which, for Pound, is the value of the poetic persona—I wanted to inhabit my personal 170-word vocabulary as fully as possible. Because I really believe that the part of yourself that you’re most ashamed of is interesting and can be used as material for art.

The vocabulary derives from a peculiar nervous habit: for several years, I’ve been compulsively transcribing everything I say, hear, read, or think—in short, all the ambient language that I can pick up—into a kind of sign-language (technically a “binary hand-alphabet”) that looks more or less like fidgeting or piano playing. The inception of this practice can be dated quite precisely at February 14, 1993—my twentieth birthday. I soon discovered that the compulsion was not directed exclusively toward ambient language, because my hand continued to form words in the hand-alphabet even when there wasn’t, apparently, anything for it to transcribe—no one was saying anything, and I wasn’t reading or even thinking anything that I was aware of. At these times, my hand tended to fixate on some phrase of indeterminate origin, which it would then repeat until I made a conscious effort to stop

it. The tone of the phrases was predominantly melancholy—e.g., “it won’t be easy and can’t be a pleasure, it won’t be easy and can’t be a pleasure.” I started keeping a record of the phrases, and when the record included about 170 different words, I decided to try writing with them.

In a sense, I was already writing with them—wasn’t the hand-alphabet a form of writing? So you could say that my project in these poems was to combine a rigorous formal constraint (writing within the limited vocabulary, and as much as possible—which is to say, not much—within the paraphraseable content of “Mauberley”) with a kind of automatic writing (since the hand-alphabet represented, at least to me, a direct connection between my hand and my unconscious).

"YOU WON'T REMEMBER THIS"

Last to know, and out of the mind,
You wish to begin the dance
Of pleasure; to heal "the soul"
And keep up the dance. Wrong from the start—

No, sorry, but you had been talking
About a brother you once had;
Moron; a change of mind;
And out of voice with easy change;

Just as you yourself must know
Sounded in the narrow throat;
Sobbing and weeping, vowing good habits,
You were like a machine of weeping.

Your Jesus, as it were, was fact:
Keep the mind on what you desire.
You say "it may be I cannot"
And yet I like you as you are.

I do not know what is "like me";
By the machine of change
I let me down to wonder,
To suppose, to be demanded.

II.

The age demanded you-know-what
And what-have-you, a kind of
Weeping in laughter, and laughter
In weeping, not, anyhow,

The dance of the mind about the word,
Not (oh, brother)
Talking rats, the “moron,”—
No. That is not what we require.

At last the “age demanded” the laughter
Of a machine, applause,
A machine hard-on, not (my god!) a sigh,
A gasp left in the throat.

III.

Rats in the soul . . . and so on.
Rats in the bowels. Change yourself!
The voice was loud and hard,
The rats in your throat sounded great!

When I was a boy
I would see Jesus here.
“Say it with rats,”
As Jesus would have it.

I am of the earth;
What rats are you who remember
An age of wonder
When a kind of pleasure was possible?

So: begin. Begin: but how?
With my narrow mind, my sore throat,
I must seem right and good to you.
I damn myself and suppose myself a god.

A voice: “Here, have a can of earth.”
“Um, that’s all right.”
By my habits you will know me,
By the habits I have on,

As the mind is, as it were,
A machine for knowing.
By the god! I know that you are right;
(But then, it contains rats).

Now, my brother can change into rats
At will. As for me, I can't complain.
How hard it is to change your habits.
Or not to have habits.

IV.

Anyhow, we do not complain
And we do not heal, n'est-ce pas?

And vowing to have myself as you desire me,
my dear, for choice and for pleasure,
from habits of mind, after all
from good habits and bladder habits
for we know how to cope and when to weep
what with the way we keep weeping,
and how to cope with a fact of mind;

For us, the sore will not heal
"it won't be easy and can't be a pleasure"
and a machine contains us
that can no longer keep in mind
from the mean of the mind, to keep
me from mind, and up to the throat
(that is, to mind myself, do you mean?);
the word is "keep out"

And it seems to change.
Eyes of the soul and eyes of the mind,
last laughter and the last dance,

at last, a word with you

at last a word with the machine
I'll have a word for every fact
(but you must remember all of it)
then, at last, the laughter of a moron.

V.

We know what choice we have,
And what is up to us:
We do not complain for a can of rats.
But there's no way left

For the great voice to keep talking,
And easy eyes are no good for seeing

But for weeping for the good that we remember,
For the dance of hard fact upon our dear earth.

A WORD WITH YOU

But you can't keep me here.
I wonder what it is to be just.
Or is it impossible?
Ah, it must be possible, otherwise

We would not have a word for it.
The word is a fact, after all;
We can be sure of that,
Just as our talking is a kind of fact.

The eyes, the voice, the fact
Of your narrow throat, ah!
Remember that your talking habits
Change the word, and change who you are.

And so I say to you now
That all our fact is no more than a guess:
For a word contains the guess,
Like a sigh sounded within laughter,

And your voice will keep on talking
When the fact of it is no more.
The machine seems to have eyes.
But what can it know?

For the machine must have our habits.
My god! How the machine can gasp,
Sob, sigh, and weep.
And yet, it is not like us.

“I HAD YOU HERE WITH A WISH . . .”

I had you here with a wish
On a “suppose”; to start with me.
Now hear a wonder—
Hear me! Oh, I would you would!

I like you. I like the machine.
When I was a boy, the rats were longer
And, it seems, would always be talking . . .
But what was it the rats demanded?

“A machine for you”: yes,
That is it. Now I remember.
Machine, heal yourself! A wonder:
Why am I talking to a machine?

I like the machine: why?
“Remember me always,” as Jesus would say;
How will the machine remember us
When we have left it? And then,

Rats are like you.
But that boy is more like you.
The way is narrow and hard
And our habits are not easy with us.

THE VOICE OF THE EARTH

“Sigh” is a word
For a kind of sobbing;
“Sobbing”: that is
A kind of weeping;

A whine, a gasp, a sort of a sigh:
That is “talking”—
Out of the throat,
Cast.

WHAT'S YOUR PLEASURE, BROTHER?

Now, what I like is the right word;
My soul seems easy when I have it right,
Otherwise, there's no pleasure on earth
 Can keep me easy.

Or suppose you had the mind of a moron.
For the moron, what's good is a hard-on
Always hard: longer, wide, and always easy,
And weeping, weeping with pleasure
And laughter. Yeah, he would like that;

Had you been a moron, you would wish for it.
But you desire much more than this,
More than pleasure, more than talking,
More than a dance with this boy or that boy,

But what you desire is not on the earth.
As for the rats: the rats "demanded a change"
To start with; and the right to say
What you know in your mind; the right

To easy talking; the right to complain
About the moron; then, choice for all rats,
And no more goddamn can.

A moron can be right. It's possible.
Maybe he is, maybe you are.
To be right is possible. But is it easy?
Talking is easy. To be god is easy.

X.

What's good for god is good for you
And me, and, in fact, for all of us,
For god is all-in-all; so all that is
Is more good than you know.

And so it seems that god can do no wrong
And that's all to the good, and it is a pleasure;
It is a pleasure and impossible,
For the way of right is narrow and hard,

And the wrong way is wide and easy
On the eyes, and the mean is hard to keep to.
Now hear the word of god: "It's not that there's
No right-and-wrong here; there's no right."

XI.

I am my talking habits,
So I am a cast of mind;
I must complain,
And yet my habits are a pleasure to me.

But I do not suppose
That pleasure is “the possible.”
The wonder of it is,
That rats can keep it up without a bladder.

XII.

“You are like a god to me; for me
The good is you.” N’est-ce pas?
You are dear to all who know you
And to me. You are all my good.

Seeing you there with your throat
And your eyes, all in down habits;
Eyes that I myself would wish for,
Eyes that are narrow, like rats’s-eyes;

Seeing into your eyes, and, ah!
Down your throat; and your voice,
How it seems to dance with laughter;
And your wide soul, that contains

All pleasure and goodness; I gasp;
I am just a boy, a moron;
Now, after your dance, seeing as your eyes
Are upon me, what can I do

But wish that it may always be so?
Or would you have my eyes to weep always?
I know you’re not here.
And then I seem to hear that voice . . .

You mean so much to me—just to hear
You talking with a vowel in your throat!
I like you more than I can say;
There is no word can mean so much!

I'm sorry for that. I have sounded
The bowels of all my talking:
It sounded great; it's no longer possible.
You are a word.

A CAN OF RATS

Begin—can you cope—

“Oh, say can you see”—laughter—

Applause—can you cope—

I know—before you were, I am—after

You are, I am—but what I am—I don’t know—

Your eyes are the machine of all my woe—

I wonder—can you cope?

Earth—keep up the dance—

And yet—I can no more—

Mind—keep up the dance—

But as for me—there for

I cannot—I am not he—

You know it’s not so easy

As that—keep up the dance.

Dear—as you desire me—

So let me seem—I change all my good

To weeping—with a word—

But for me—all would be right

And good—there would be

No wrong on earth—but for me—

As you desire me—so let me appear.

AFTERWORD

Pleasure is but a can
Of earth, and the soul
No more than
A great bladder.

A can of Jesus is our god,
A can of Jesus and/or rats;
The rats are weeping;
Jesus is the earth;

The earth is your brother.
Here are your good habits.
Say it
In a voice so loud,

So loud that Jesus can hear it,
So loud that I can no longer hear it.
That voice! You sounded
Just like my brother.

XV.

“But how can the machine know what the soul is, and
how can it begin to remember?”

“As the machine cannot dance, as the machine cannot
hear the voice or see the word, how can it begin to sup-
pose that there is a pleasure in the mind yet more dear?
And that all other pleasure is just a great sore, and not to
be demanded?”

Out of the mind once more, my soul;
As you were talking to yourself,
All will narrow
To a word within, at last, a word.

A word within a word, weeping
For a word, and sounded then
Like rats in the eyes of desire.

A word . . . a word that will last
Longer, and cast about as I can.
The machine let out a whine,
“Keep it to yourself” . . .

Oh to be a machine . . . to say
A word, and not to mean
By it. Then, to mean all . . .
As a boy may have

A change of mind;
And the earth contains you.
And god contains the earth.
A machine contains that—

Maybe there is no word for it—
All-knowing, all-seeing:
A machine, therefore.
May I say another word about it:

The will to change,
Into a god!—

To change one word into you-know-what.
To change the soul into a machine
Of yourself, and rats into rats
Of the mind. The will to remember:

Out of desire, a word is sounded,
For it is the will of god,
All-knowing, all-seeing, and so on.
—Remember who was good and kind to you

When god would not let you have
So much as a damn.
—Right.
But don't.

"THE AGE DEMANDED"

You are like us. Or you are not.
Anyway, you are not
What we require, you are not,
Ahem, what we demanded,

That's for sure. You are like us:
What you have to say, we know.
We say it always. As you begin to say
It, there it is. We say it now.

It is in the throat now
And we are talking about it
As always. We know all that we know
By, of, for, within, and out of it.

For talking habits are habits
Of the mind, as you know.
The word, as it were, is our god:
We cannot change it, we have no choice.

You are not like us; what you have
To say, we cannot begin
To know. We cannot hear it.
Or suppose we hear it (we do not):

What can it mean? Out of your throat
You have sounded a hard word, a word
Impossible. What word it is
We do not know: we do not

Remember it; we cannot
Keep it in the mind; it seems
Longer to us than it is, maybe,
Like a word sounded down in the bowel.

But we can complain about it.
Maybe we can change it.
So let's have it.
You must say it now, my dear;

Otherwise, how will we know?
Rats to you, and up your bowel;
Keep it in your bowel, rats to god;
Hear me with eyes, can you?

Rats in a can, oh boy!
But what-for and why-why?
Here's to you, brother, and here's to you;
Here's to the word of god and your brother;

Here's to all the pleasure we can't have;
Here's to the boy that your god had, Jesus;
Here's to the sore that Jesus had
That will not heal and is a wish;
Here's to the habits you cast out; here's to

The habits you keep, and the habits of god.
Here's to rats! What rats? There are rats:
Down on the earth. Out, rats; damn you!
Let me have rats, rats for a change!

As for you—no more, I say,
No more, with all my soul.
Every Good Boy Demanded Fact . . .
How much longer can you keep it up?
This is not what I had in mind:
How much longer do I have to be in it?

It's impossible. But I have
A machine to do it for me. Dear machine—

You are not so much a brother
To me, more of a god, I guess.
I am in the right. My laughter is the last.
That boy had a mind like a machine.

XVII.

I have a voice, but no throat;
I am a word all vowel;
I have no eyes, but I am all-seeing;
I am but a boy, and my age is great;
Now I am in your bladder.

Who am I?
The machine is sorry for me,
I know, and what a pleasure
It is. Now you know why I require

A machine: for pleasure.
I have a soul: as for the machine . . .
You are right, I am
The machine: a good guess.

You must be a god: yeah, right.
What kind of god is that? Can you
Change woe and weeping to pleasure
And loud laughter? Then do it.

You must be the god of weeping.
But you keep talking.
A good god for us
In the age of the weeping moron.

Say otherwise:
“And now I cannot wonder.
So I must whine;
No change.”

FOR PLEASURE

“Sigh no more,” moron, sigh no more!
Let laughter have voice, for a change;
Let there be pleasure, let there be goodness;
Be kind, be kind and be knowing!

Let like keep with like, and no more
Weeping; let rats dance with rats and
Not be sorry; let laughter last
Longer than weeping.

And Jesus will appear to sort out
The good rats from the rats
That are left, and the god
Will say with loud voice: “Be rats!

And I will be hard with you, for all
That you complain: may the earth
Be sore with you upon it;
May the earth always be in your way.”

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