

# Speech Acts

*poems*

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*For William McCullough*

## **Part I**

## SPEECHIFICATION

I could grab you by the collar, slap you around a little.

I would send a hit man of prosody after you, *D'you read* that poem all the way through, man? Next time (sniff, sniff), *break your kneecaps, buddy*. Illocutionary acts, consequences of stating, asking, promising, warning, threatening, would any of these work? Or just thumbscrews, baby, turned by a beefcake of a guy, not so pretty, but not bad looking, not dumb, but dumb enough to make you feel smart? Laure-Anne asks, what is it that prevents the speaker from remaining silent and bends over the poem like it's cheese and bread after a long fast. You want to end your own hunger, but no one else's; you want to share your pain, the numb spots growing, the taste of American cheese so bland it's nearly destroyed your taste buds. This poem is not made of speech acts, but is an art installation like found pebbles twisted in wire around rebar, nothing suave about it, and lasting only until someone fills its boots with cement and drowns it in the river like some lousy informer.

## AVOCADOS

The name comes from the Spanish taken from the Aztec, *ahuacatl*, meaning testicle, from the shape; a symbol of fertility to them. A woman next to me takes two in one hand, jostling them as if they were Chinese meditation balls, the chimes soothing the air. She says,

I never tire of avocados; if I could, I would eat them every day. *Hass are fine*, she says, *but have you ever had a Hawaiian Sharwil?* I shake my head. *An avocado milkshake, she asks?* No, I say. *Me neither*, she says, *but I hope to one day.* I nod knowingly, and it's as if

we've shared a secret, but she smiles and moves on. Those balls I am thinking of are usually Cloisonné, an Asian art form dating to over 500 years ago. The original color was a blue, so light it evoked a still pond surface reflecting a spring sky. Most

avocados are green, dark and mottled, nearly rotted looking when ripe. *Cloisonné* comes from the French, *cloison*, or partition, from the Latin, *cludere*, to close. Blowjob is just another word for *fellatio* from the Latin for to suck milk from. I recall my first one, not an avocado,

but a blow job, how the boy made me, how I wasn't ashamed because it was what I'd thought about in the partition between day and night before falling asleep for years. I was startled at how good secrets can be if handled right, by the various names we give them, how they ripen with time.

## THE ELISIONIST

In French, when vowels are elided,  
an orthographer's tool,  
the apostrophe,  
orchestrates with flourish,  
but always  
there's the choosing  
between liaison or elision,  
or both as in  
*J'arrive à l'hôtel pour un liason.*  
Don't tell my husband,  
who speaks French, but prefers  
the schwa as in *amuïssement*.  
This is all just *amuse-bouche*—  
to amuse the mouth—  
or more correctly, *amuses-bouche* in the plural.  
Before the hotel bed, there is the lobby,  
and before the *hors d'oeuvres*,  
something to excite the taste buds,  
and a little wine, no? Or perhaps  
you'd prefer to meet me  
somewhere else, say the library,  
where you can't buy anything,  
where whatever you use is simply on loan.  
We can always touch the books'  
spines rather than each other's.  
There's no telling what might happen.  
No telling.

## PIG'S TAIL TONGUE

We waited to see what would happen  
next, but there was no kiss, just an un-kiss;  
we remained bifurcated, speaking only  
with tongues not in them, your words  
across the space between us understandable,  
the opposite of Mandarin and Cantonese.  
If you wrote me a letter, I couldn't read it,  
but speak to me, and it's all quite clear.  
Sometimes a poem is like that: clear in  
the air, full of knots on the page, or  
the reverse, pictographs anyone can  
apprehend, but otherwise filled with  
obstructions. The man who invented  
Esperanto was an ophthalmologist,  
meaning he studied the science of eyes,  
and he saw the barrier which wasn't  
about sound but apprehension. Roll  
your pig's tail tongue around my little  
finger, word-slop our fodder, thrash  
with me in the gutter of utterance.  
You can tell a pig from the friends  
he grunts with. Toss some pigs before  
pearls, some cats to gold coins, let  
the cows hear our music. Tell me  
you see my eyes in Pig Latin, tell me  
you love me in two ways or in some  
unpronounceable way, un-kiss me  
so hard, I am kissed anyway.

## THE ONLY TRUCK I KNOW

The poet wants an energy plan,  
    something that admits of strategy  
and pounce, and makes space  
    for accordions and cement trucks  
and something like life strained

through cheese cloth and baked  
    for two hours at 425 degrees.  
Enough cinnamon and nutmeg  
    and almost anything tastes good.  
Someone says, don't make them

laugh, make them cry. The sky  
    has been overcast for days. Smell  
the air coming in off the New  
    Jersey coast, a little Argentina  
in it, and can you hear the whine

of the accordion in the distance,  
    the squeezing hard and crying?  
I'm driving the only truck I know,  
    one made of blue days and new  
scars—crocodile teeth too big

for my small mouth—the grill  
    in front plastered with insects,  
small rodents, bones and feathers  
    hard to digest, but proof something  
has lived and then been run down.

## WHAT BURNS

I want to kiss the mouth of another  
    language, feel the small muscles electric  
and tingling around their vowels,  
    the consonants swallowed, the silences  
like small maps of a small  
    engine that rests on both of our lips.  
Chomsky said language  
    is too difficult to deduce by attention  
to repetitions, but I will  
    repeat this exercise until your tongue  
feels like my own and the spittle  
    of apprehension collects in the pit  
of my mind. Your reason  
    isn't all I care for; when you speak, the air  
is shaped into momentary volcanoes,  
    the ash drifting into my eyes, blinding me,  
so I can finally see vowels  
    that float in the air like ash, like snow,  
searing and momentarily illuminated.