THE HINGE

Connor Fisher
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THE HINGE

And while walking home
I saw that the book I held
displayed four objects on
its cover: the skull of
a horse, a tree with its
roots intact, a flying song-
bird, and a woman
in outline—all placed
in these exact positions
on the book-front
with intent, an intentional
arrangement, which tipped
the hand of an unknown
artist who hoped
the selection and shape
of objects would give
the book something similar
to “meaning,” or perhaps in
a moment of sentiment the
pattern of four objects
was intended to have
reached out, to caress my
face or tousle my hair
like a new, young, overeager
lover whose affections I
could learn to return—
but this is the hinge
the poem swings on, and
the trick of objects
in space; I trip over myself
to find a sequence of events
which we would term
“experience”—but what if
the sequence had not been
arranged or planned; it
came together by pure chance,
and so I mistrust objects,
whose lives (yes, lives) are
arranged by chance and
seem to cry out a mantra:
*I’m not nostalgic for a world
of continuities, but I’m
not afraid of it either—
it’s the supreme fatalism
to take one’s chance*, the
book and the imaginary
lover whisper in tandem;
the truth is that I suspect
objects arrange themselves,
even the images of objects—
objects on the book cover, in art,
in real lives are free to
quiver as birds in the
hollow of a rock and sink
into the soil, and to choose
their position and angle
on a canvas—imagine a farmer
who picks and hoes her
field all spring, who plants
seeds or potatoes in April,
waters and weeds the rows
only to find come autumn
the plants and dormant mounds
of soil have rearranged themselves
(as if by strange, earthly magic)
and now lie in positions that
surprise her, perhaps on the
roof of a shed, or moved
to smooth over a nearby
creek bed, not out of
malice or mischief but of an
object’s desire to change
places with another solid
entity regardless of the
practical need for a harvest—
if this were a narrative,
*one anecdotal fact would
be followed by another,*
*and many together would
make a story*—yet
looking back to the haphazard
cover of my own imaginary
book, I have never found
facts to be orderly (least
of all the unsettling pairing
of horse-skull and bird,
which co-exist neither as
symbols nor as signs, but
only as if each were a
rare metal mined for
an alchemical ritual) and
I read as if any narrative
were composed by a roll
of dice as a nod to
chance, as if in their
deliberate bouncing each die
taps out a message:
“What you call experience
is as likely a sequence of
happenings whose order discomforts
you” and even the metaphor
of rolling dice seems too
small or too predictable;
we should speak of 1,000
dice tumbling down onto
a tabletop, an avalanche
in miniature, rolled, if it
seems possible, by pairs upon
pairs of hands until the
torrent has ended, each die
has chosen a number; then
someone, a narrator, could step
in to order and explain the
fullness of the mess—
although “fullness” is not the
right word, it has too rich
of a texture; the plastic
click of imaginary dice on
an imaginary table could
only make a thin sound, reedy
even, jarring as the hollow
click on tile or wooden floors
of a white-tail buck who has
wandered into your house right
now, in this real world, tonight,
and stands confused in
your kitchen or your un-
cleaned bedroom, wondering
what need exists for
this much privacy, for this
much individual room in
a space formerly known
only as “nature”—imagine the buck treads
from room to room, pokes
his muzzle in a pile of
laundry, and so leaves your house;
the individual room, he has
realized, resembles the individual
line in a poem: a way to preserve privacy,
a way to channel energy
from private to private
space until some dynamic part
runs over; \textit{when the}
\textit{individual line ceases to}
\textit{have energy for me, I}
\textit{usually break the line there}
while at other points in
the poem lines seem to
break themselves, as if
under the building pressure of
their own great weight ...
which can only be the
reason for roots and
branches on the cover of
the book in my arms: each
growth of the illustrated tree
forms its own lines, arguably
parallel in structure, gesture,
direction, and made of similar
wood, but differing somehow
in intent: some rise
while the rest sink under
soil— but surely the
intent of objects lies out-
side of my understanding,
and trees have unknown
contingencies I would lack
the grounding to imagine:
the amount and directional flow
of groundwater, levels of
decayed organic matter in
soil, saturation of earth
and the depth of bedrock far
beneath the topsoil; the
prevailing winds and their
average speed in all four
seasons; on top of this you
have the whims of trees
themselves, their own acts
and foibles: the preference of
one for nutrients in foliage while another
prefers to press its roots
through decaying animal
bodies—I’m not asking if we can mimic or become trees; not asking “Is the man a bird?” “Is the man a tree?” but hoping to make space in the poem not for ambiguity—which always finds a way in through the cracks—but for these words and letters, dots of ink and reams of paper, to bring all their own knowing to bear, while I sit on the side-line, having a beer or a sandwich and watching as whatever we call “knowledge” is created on the page—think of an orator who clears her throat to speak, to say, “Only listen to the cracks and texture of my voice, coming from these specific lungs, and the air which my tongue, cheeks, and lips shape”: she begins, and her address has an improvisatory note as if it were beautifully cobbled together by dozens of actors—the
woman and the parts
of her body—and so it
is her silhouette that rests
on the book cover, the
fourth peculiar image, her
hands held high in a
persuasive pose—and I
feel no surprise at this
discovery although, if truth
be told, I have known the
silhouette’s origin all along—but the irrevocable just
happens whether or not it’s
known in advance, and then
there’s the separate question of
whether not-knowing or know-
ing would change the outcome
of a set sequence of
events (say, the specific
form of an outlined body
on the cover of an imaginary
book)—so I picture
myself returning home, setting
the book on its shelf,
taking off my shoes and
jacket and relaxing, pouring
a drink or making a cup
of tea; the evening is strangely
relaxing like a woodcutter
eating bread in a solitary
wood: an image designed
to calm one’s mind or
excite a humble passion
for the domestic and the
private—appropriate, then,
that it’s the woodcutter who
eats alone, a solitary
reject from the poem’s so-
called cast of characters,
perhaps even the sinister
(though introverted) villain of
the poem or the dismal
figure at its not-quite-
center; you feel your stomach
tighten and your throat con-
strict; he both compels and
frightens you with his violence
to trees—trees, which have
been made into books for
decades and are now found in
dwindling supply, so our wood-
cutter sits as both savior
and scourge in the world
of books ... but isn’t the
axe itself also deserving
of blame or praise? as
the agent who bites into
the tree and begins to render
paper—maybe the
woodcutter only approached this
forest to hear the song
of the woodcutter women
and the axe began to chop
on its own—unlikely,
I'll admit, but otherwise
what roles are left to
play by axe and book
alike, other than those of
false passivity—
and these objects pass through
time and remember, too; how
else could we invoke
*rock memory, water memory*
with a straight face?—
and I see no contradiction
between praising the memory
of objects and mistrusting
their contingencies, like some
medieval fear that suspicious
persons turn into animals at
midnight; the fear that the
boundary between man and
beast is thin and permeable by unknown agents:
perhaps a specific alignment
of planets and moons, or
a change in the spiritual
breeze, a dancing ring of
fairies deep in the forest—
and if none of this happens
I can at least admit
that *things aren’t supposed
to happen according to plan*
and thus when they do
it’s a small dislocation
in the universe—
on the shelf, the book has
shifted its spine and so
I straighten it: the object
will be stable for a moment,
but beyond that another
willful tremor could topple
both shelf and book, kitchen
table, chairs, sofa and desk,
a cacophony of glass and
silverware tumbling from
ceiling to floor ...
“the world is not ours,”
says the woman outside my
window—and I nod, and
I nod, and feel as if
the ground begins to lift.
You awoke, dressed and confused, of course, on the beach while above you a single bird sang from the branch of an evergreen—a sound which, to your ringing ears, seemed out of place; perhaps the bird had known you would wake here and came purposefully to find you, or else the bird could have been blown off course by a storm and arrived in this tree on this beach purely by coincidence—so you sat up, brushed sand from your hair, and searched towards the trees for a lost pair of sunglasses, only to remember that you exist in a space, hemmed in by other trees that are called “real trees” and whatever experience you had passed through or were about to pass through could likewise be called a “real” event, although taking a moment to reflect before forcing yourself to stand up and walk forward, along from the sandy dunes, you recalled a thin memory near another tree planted with roots in the ground, perhaps a nearby trowel and a parent or child.
as if you had spent your life
wandering confused among forests,
some murky, half-lived dream
in which you played every role:
parent, child, perhaps tree, maybe even
the trowel that the child used to dig holes
in damp, loose gravel, or the half-smoked
cigarette the bored parent puffed
at before tossing it away, out of
the child’s line of sight———
and this wispy character you dream,
remember, or imagine, but whose
inner thoughts become more real to
you every second, wishes that the
vacation they have taken the child
on could have gone otherwise, that
the two of them could have seen
the southwestern deserts—but here
they are, stuck in a foggy forest near
a playground, as the child asks to hear
a certain narrative and the parent replies,
“I have told you before, the story: How
a bag of oranges has dried up
and the fruit is now as husks...”
or is it you who has told this
story before, or who has been
told it enough times that the
space between telling and hearing
loses its shape; these two ways
of grasping at narrative conjoin
in your mind as you press
forward along the beach, noting
with disinterest, as if your body
were not your own, the pleasure of
sand grains between your toes and
rhythmic slaps of waves coming in—
but nature is a distraction;
you thought you saw a familiar face
in a crowd four hundred yards
away and you press towards this
hint of familiarity with a single-
minded focus, although the beach seems
to lengthen with each half-stumbled
step you take, and the face you
once hoped would be familiar is now
farther away and more alien than
before ... you would not be
surprised to find that you've been
walking, in fact, on a treadmill with
sporadic handfuls of sand tossed
on the track by the hands of un-
seen tricksters; perhaps even the sea-
gulls and crabs are in on the
prank—and the waves may not
be real waves at all, but a few
shallow inches of water rolled
towards you again and again, like
the water in a kiddie wave pool
that a machine crests shore-ward
until it is turned off, drained, and left for
the night—or, worse, the waves you see
may be something like a projection
splayed out on your retinas and cast from
an unseen light, so what you take to be
real, tangible, empirical is more like
hallucination than perception ...
perhaps your trust in nature has
been misplaced, you realize, and the
system you called “natural” is more like
a network of connecting functions;
you glance back to the trees and see
vivid green sunlight that was
profundity is now invested with linkage,
the grass, invested with linkage,
the whole sky, a tainted link—
not that discrete nodes and linkages
can’t be profound, but still, it’s un-
nerving to discover pseudo-technological
connection where you expected to
find ... nothing, only the slow processes
that you believed had shaped the physical
world but now came to doubt,
unless at the bottom, some rhizome
structure forms the very linkages which
connect the forces and workings of
nature——by now, you are far across
the beach from where you began, and
the face you thought you would
recognize turned out to be the face
of a stranger, although one uncannily
similar to a man you met many years
ago: brown hair, blue eyes, glasses,
the sort of face that could belong

to any number of acquaintances;

exhaustion had caught up with you, so

you angled your path inland, back
towards the trees and looked for

a patch of color, but from something

*longer than flowers, something purple——*

*but the earth is tired of comparisons*

and now no colors quite look alike, each
tree shows a different tone of green, or
yellow, red, orange, and you spy
fine differences between the most
similar shades; grains of sand
possess subtly different hues from
one another, as do flying water drops-
lets splashed up by successive waves—
you look and realize you are

surrounded by differences; nothing is the
same and even similarity seems like
a fleeting concept ... of course the
earth dislikes comparison when to compare
has become impossible, when
a category like ‘color’ is too naïve,
too optimistic or normative; there is
no more ‘color,’ only crimson, rose,
lavender, periwinkle, and you look to the
trees which again surround you to
see that their up-thrust shapes resist
categorization; no two tree trunks follow
the same almost-straight line; pairs
of needles or leaves seem similar at
first but you soon spot the overwhelming differences and realize that no leaf can convey the intricacies of any other, which, as cliché as that statement may sound, is another way of saying that the small engine which chugs along to create the natural world has never made two of the same object——— you sink down to recline with your back against the trunk of another evergreen, close your eyes, and breathe slowly to calm your pounding heart and enjoy the breeze ... so you look at the swerving coastline and think “I should find pleasure only in the straight line. I should cut out all curves and melodies. I should think of the effect and should find pleasure...”—and you do feel pleased, or at least something like it, although the shoreline does not straighten but, through your closing eyes, looks more rounded and contoured than before; the sounds from birds and the tide change too, both are leaving you now, and even the trees may vanish, the sand on the shore itself start to flow out to sea, you believe.
LANDSCAPES

Think about it, imagine it, let your mind displace itself to any landscape of your choosing: the sight is not one you have seen arranged in this order before; it’s what you cobble together from dozens of weekend trips to the country, visits to an uncle’s or great-aunt’s backwoods cabin somewhere between Gunnison and Georgetown; perhaps the view borrows from fields and gullies you walked through years ago, the river winding through foothills down to the mellow woodland lake, the crests of a dozen snow-capped mountains suspended at the far side of your private horizon ...

the place hasn’t vanished,
but the angle of
time that became what
you laughingly called your
“experience” is gone—
so you misremember the
places you have never been,
violently tear at the thought until
you’re left with a bleeding collage
of memory ... or is the
situation more complex?
think of a cartographer
at her wooden table, who
must make a map to
mimic landscapes she has
never seen—she picks
up pens, she shades the oceans
blue; land, green, topography displays no favorites
although whatever doubtful
“integrity” nature itself
possesses is surely altered
by its transition to the flat
space of maps: the names
of seashore towns run out
to sea, or maybe towns
and names are, alike, invented—
and our cartographer is
a genius at mimicry and
subversion, at making images
that resemble but do not
represent genuine geography—
a misplaced mountain
here, an altered river to its
east, a fabricated town north
of them both ... but if
tonight you were to drive
to where you thought these
parts of landscape did
not exist, you might find
them, in fact, present and
having been in their place
for decades, leading you to
wonder if the map or the
landscape were wrong, or how one
can exert a potent coercion
over the other ... while
truly neither can be “wrong,”
as if her maps deliberately
lied or the physical world
set out to disfigure it-
self by building degrees of
difference between landscape and
map———but we are
not idiots; we have been
to school, and the world
is many, we have learnt—
so from the many-world
we draw or build our own
images of mountains and
grasslands, and happily agree
that every possible map
describes in exact detail
some possible configuration
of landscape, just perhaps
one that hasn’t been discovered
or viewed from the precise, correct angle yet: the clouds look fresh today, to the south a field of pineapple grows, rows of imagined trees line a real highway; everywhere you look, the earth makes its maximal effort to ... what, exactly? to produce forms, to evolve slightly shorter beaks on slightly larger birds, is this all? I suppose. But how many small changes in a landscape are needed to justify a new map, a new paper or digital projection, set to mimic an arrangement that may only last a few short years?—as if any change were in itself an aesthetic betrayal, to turn away from a close friend, the friend who best mimics your own idiosyncrasies, who can present your succinct portrait to a curious and admiring public, while you portray hidden depths of their so-called personality ... ; and this is why,
when you and I finally look away from the landscape or map that has held our attention and look back towards the cities, we whisper of our shared dislike of mirrors, and the backwards men and women inside the glass who are only one false step away from leaping out towards our unprotected eyes and throat; of course we want our reflection to be clean as wood as it issues from the hand of nature, but even a single mirror will double the number of people in this room, will render them perfect but inverse, the tricks of multiples and geometry that nature has aimed to master for centuries—but nature’s one mistake has been to add new materials, to add complexity to its equations and algorithms, then turn against its own products when they are not as proportionate and exact of a replica as
an undressed man before a
mirror ... new biology has
clogged the system, nature
thinks to itself, and votes in
a draconian approach: to
kill its own imperfections;
so the small creatures who dwell
between blades of grass or
at the bottom of the ocean
live their days in a land-
scape of terror, in which any
creature could destroy, kill,
harm, or maim them like a
poet smudging out a
poorly shaped letter or parenthesis—
think of a cave diver,
crouched in the dank belly
of some claustrophobic cavern
who thinks to herself, having
been brought this far by
nature, I have been brought
out of nature, and nothing
here shows me the image
of myself; nor is she
shown alien or ancient
images; the submerged cavern
hosts no cave paintings or
irreverent graffiti drawn by
bored teenagers in a moment
of lust or anger (and who,
being 15, could easily discern the
two?—so the diver realizes that being outside of
nature means being outside of
the rightful realm of images;
watery walls shift and swim
in the beams of her headlamp but never resolve, never
cement enough to suggest
a human or animal form—which
is the great pleasure drawn
from viewing clouds
as they drift between shape
and shapelessness—but the
cave is utterly inhuman, and
the diver cannot bring herself
to imagine that its wet
walls and floor have any
qualities other than their sodden
reality; pretending that she lays
on her back beneath a
canopy of palm leaves
and swaying coconuts would
be impossible; pretending that
a hammock swings
lightly from between two up-thrust
stalagmites is laughably naïve:
the place resists images—
soon all sense of reality
outside the cavern fades
and both nature and image
seem inconsequential; this place
becomes a landscape full of an original chaos but not in itself divine, as divinity links too neatly with the willingness to accommodate or admire a certain “beauty” from jumbled collections not considered an image ...

think of the detritus, the insect swarms and shrub clippings outside of our own front door if you want a glimpse into the immediacy of nature; although you and I both know how easily we came to believe alluring fictions about the natural world and to leave unquestioned the ambiguous motives of animal and plant alike: the blandly manicured grass itself could hold hidden malice, a lust for blood or blind hatred of its forced uniform appearance, as grass seems obligated to play the part of something you’d call “surface,” an unwilling mediator between lofty trees, clouds, bicycles, telephone poles and the earthy secrets of rock, soil, and clay; think of landscape like this: the balloons drift thoughtfully over the
land, not exactly commenting
on it; this is the range
of the poet’s experience,
which means that although
neither poet nor poem can
trace or even reach down
to touch the landscape, both
author and text remind you
of the pleasure that can be
taken by lightly skimming
over the tops of pine trees,
nearly snagged but
at last swerving away, or by
catching your reflection—dis-
torted as it may be—in the
smooth surface of a rural
lake—and so pleasure, then,
may be the outcome of land-
scapes, the modern pleasure
of hovering just above that
forever untouchable object
whose artifice (an open
secret which nature makes
no effort to hide) only
increases your joy, since touch
would somehow prove it real,
somehow prove the landscape
pedestrian, so it should
always lie directly over the
next rise, the next mountain—
out of habit you glance
nervously at your watch,
while at the same moment,
in a park across the street,
a child lifts up his cheap
camera to take a photo of
a picturesque copse of trees
and the craggy peak
behind it—he lifts the camera
to his eye as a pair of
sparrows circle and play
among the branches; he thinks
that each bird *brushes*
in a *fulsome way against*
the *fulsomeness of nature*
and snaps the photo—but
one of the sparrows flies out
of frame just before the shutter
clicks, so the image is
incomplete, only a partial repre-
sentation (and the other bird
that escaped the photo, does
it still exist in a space
devoted to the liminal,
the not-quite-photographed,
or has it been cut out of
the world of images?)—
but the boy doesn’t realize
the photo’s imperfection; he
won’t develop it for several
days and will have for-
gotten that a second sparrow
ever flew beside the first;
he will have forgotten that
a landscape is not what you
saw but what you tell your-
self that you remember having
seen ... a sort of binding
up of words and impressions,
parts of daily experience
bundled, tidy, made singular,
simplified and secure in the adding
up of all things into a
block of hay from which
no strand is permitted to
extrude———-and so the
bird is forgotten, maybe
to its own benefit as
it beds down tonight
in a bush near your
house, outside of images,
as if it had withdrawn itself
from whatever pool
of visual fragments we use
to piece together landscapes,
away from mirrors and
the prying lens of the
camera, silent and
content with its paltry
meal, this insect, some water.
NOTES:

In these poems, italicized lines indicate quotation. Writers quoted in each poem are:

“The Hinge”: Lyn Hejinian, Ed Dorn, Armand Schwerner, John Ashbery, Jackson Mac Low, and Alice Notley.

“Narrative”: Barbara Guest, Diane Wakosi, Clayton Eshleman, and Robert Kelly.

Connor Fisher lives in Athens, Georgia. He has an MA in English Literature from the University of Denver, an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and is working towards a PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. His poetry and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Volta, Rain Taxi, Dreginald, Word for / Word, Tarpaulin Sky, 32 Poems, Typo, the Colorado Review,* and *7x7.*