

4: ROUNDNESS

This installment drifts slowly toward the anatomical fact, so there's a long preface, but the workshop structure remains the same: get a feeling for an anatomical fact then transpose that felt fact into a structure for writing.

Drifting Meditation On Containers

I am writing this in the first month of the coronavirus lockdowns. I can't keep track of the days and if before I felt any remnant obligation to a weekly schedule beyond a few video music lessons that my son takes each week, that imperative has mostly faded. There are some things I could say I am "working" on, but I have found it best to pick them up when they call me, but not push them to happen on any particular day.

Many of the days that have felt best in this hunkering down pause are filled instead with practice, practice that doesn't really lead to anywhere but its own pleasure. There is a deepening that belongs to practice, some pleasure in getting a little better at an instrument or a little more mobile, or learning a new alphabet, or being able to identify a few more types of minerals or trees, but my main experience of practice is being held in an engrossing present, a dropping away of goal thinking and a dropping away of the anxiousness that belongs to the confusion and indeterminacy of what's happening in our world. They are containers in this containment, containers that allow me to experience the day in a way that feels gratifying, meaningful without being public facing.

This paradoxical idea of a good container, the lightness gift given by a limit, has something to do with today's attempt at drawing a thread between an anatomical fact and a way of writing.

One year when my kid was just old enough that I felt I could take a week to myself, I went to SFDI, a dance and improvisation festival, where I took a workshop with (the bodhisattva) Ralph Lemon. He talked a lot about making and unmaking as an ongoing oscillating polarity of practice, whether improvisational or compositional. A word that I left that week with, marked with the special compact energy of a key, was container. Looking back at my notebook from that week, I found:

"Container that allows the energy some agency"

The energy, here, I think, is the energy of showing up in the medium. The thickness and reality of the medium. What does the medium you work in allow, when you are able to show up in it? I used to think of this as species of thinking or forms of life – and I've flown the flag of expatriate "choreographic thinking" in all of my wanders – but today as I try to write about this, I find myself really thinking of the medium itself as its own material, as a kind of substrate (whereas, perhaps the varieties of thinking concept envisions the same world material differently navigated according to different intelligences and vocabularies).

Lately, I have been on a memory dive, and I have been rejoicing in the particular experience of conjuring the dead that can occur in writing, and even be held by the cadences and images so that the conjuring can be revisited and shared. The conjuring that occurs, the dead-presence that occurs for me then, is different from flashes of memory; it belongs to the medium of words and the act of writing, it is a fruiting body made of language stuff. Likewise, when I am dancing, especially eyes-closed and so deep in the visual experience rendered by my mind's eye, I can experience a continuity of form between my body and other living things, a feeling of being held in the vast network and deep time of growing things that have resulted in, among other things, the movement possibilities that my physical body affords. And that is a kind of hallucinogenic fruiting body made of anatomy stuff.

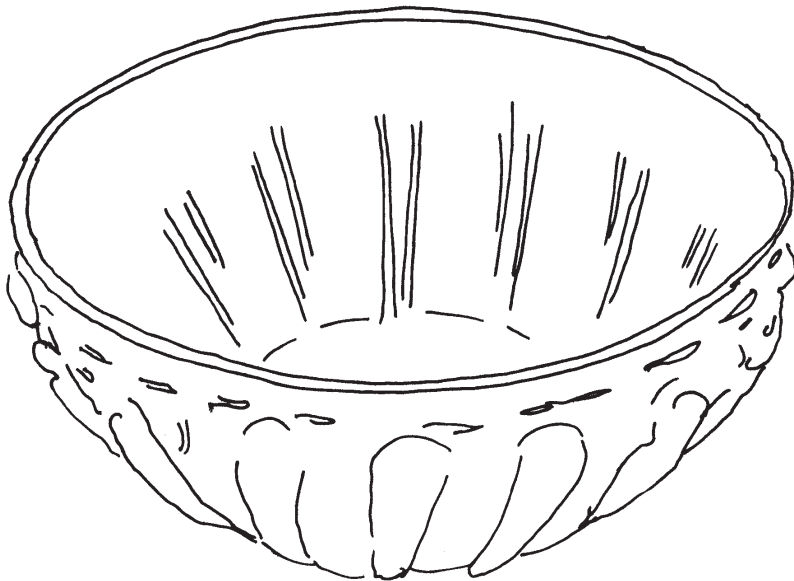
Maybe some part of you says yes, I recognize that, I've done that kind of ocean swimming? I hope so. How do you build an invitational space so that "the energy [of your medium] has some agency"?

Container, like a festival tent.

Well anyway, container in the way Ralph Lemon invoked it in this workshop was like taking the idea of a limitation (think of “limitation” in a formalist way, like an Oulipo constraint or something equally strict), and imagining the limitation not as a task, but as the outline of a circle, a circumference around you. Inside the circle, which is utterly constrained by the simple limitation that bounds it, is freedom, presence. The presence is found in relationship: to the other occupants of the container, human or not, living or not, materially real or not. The container could be anything; it’s a tool to keep yourself there. And anything can act as a container. It could be a literal, marked out space (we watched videos of Chicago footwork, taped boxes on the floor defining a zone of action) or a syntactical form (speak only questions, for example, use only words that contain the letter “e”). The container’s value is in demarcating a space within which you can keep yourself alive, present, questioning—moving in a medium.

We had a score, I think even called the container score, where the group would stand in a circle and someone would enter the circle and dance for maybe a minute, and that minute’s dance would become the container for the group. We would then continue, as a group, for maybe 45 minutes, entering, moving, retreating, watching, all occupying the container laid down by the first mover, however we understood it. The group’s physical circle would be a container for this container score (although at a certain point we would inevitably allow it to dissolve). Instead of “playing with” or “developing” a movement idea—a sort of added-value way of thinking that we are inundated with—the score asked us just to stay inside the idea. But at the same time, inside the idea, the idea itself becomes impossibly spacious.

Obviously, containers can take other shapes than circles, but I like the image of a circle as its elemental visual representation. And that takes us to today’s anatomical fact.



Anatomical Fact

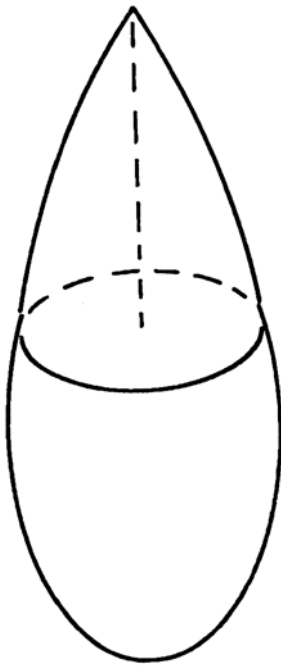
I wanted to think about three round chambers in our skeletal form. The pelvic bowl, the rib case, the skull. Thinking about these structures for their roundness takes us away from the precision of some of the other anatomical facts we’ve looked at. Rounding-up to roundness. (Actually so much of ideokinesis works through a kind of rounding up: the faith that a simple active image can interface with the incredible actual complexity of the body.)

One of Barbara Clark's manuals is called *The Body is Round – Use All the Radii*. In it, she tracks through a whole set of bony structures offering roundness ideas. Wheels of weight transference at the ankles and pelvis. Ribs as fingers encircling. Below is a compressed version of “The Head is Round” from that manual. You can follow a short version of this even sitting in a chair. Before you start, touch one finger to the tip of your nose, and place a finger from the other hand directly across from that point on the back of your head. Project a line between your two fingers and try to visualize a center point between them (tap the top of your skull to help define the center if you need). About at that projected center point is the front of the atlas joint (C1), where the skull rests on the top of the spine. Just below that is the axis joint (C2), which allows the skull to swivel side to side. You can think of these two places as a center region of the skull sphere, the meeting place between the spine and the skull, the skull balancing and hanging off that point like one of those balancing bird toys.

The Head Is Round – Barbara Clark (excerpt)

“Think of the head as round. Feel a line through the center of the sphere. Let the head finds its balance front to back on the atlas and turn side to side on the axis.

“Exercise 1: Look at the drawing and think of capping your head with a cone. The tip of the cone points directly up the ceiling. First, picture moving clockwise around the circle at the base of the cone. Then think of the action...counter-clockwise. Finally, think the line from the center of the top of your head through the middle of the cone to its axis tip. Drop down through the spinal heels [imagine each vertebra as a pair of feet, toes toward the front, and relax the heels down] as you direct the tip of the cone toward the ceiling... [I like to add, draw circles on the ceiling with the tip of your cone hat.]



“Exercise 2: Awareness of balancing the head at the center of its depth gives you a sense of a round back of the head. The forehead is also round. To sense this shape, get behind the back of the forehead. Think of how it curves forward into a spherical shape. This allows the forehead to take the lead in movement as the chin and jaw soften downward. Then you will be able to feel the uplift of the brain and not its weight.

“Exercise 3: ...Think of narrowing in toward from the base of the head through the width of the atlas to the axis pivot. Then widen between the outer ears.”

ACTIVITY

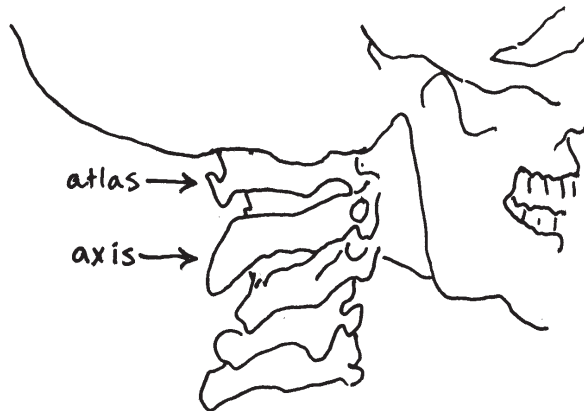
With those images now:

Take your round head for a spin. A walk, a roll around the floor.

Then project a similar roundness to the ribs and the pelvis.

Walk around, imagining three bowls, three roundnesses, stacked up like a tea tray.

Feel them as light. Feel the space between them. Try to perceive the extent of their roundness (at the perimeter) as a way of understanding the real depth of the organ masses within the containers. Don't just be a front surface and a back surface.



Writing Prompt

Choose a borrowed story to retell. If you have already been retelling a borrowed story for the earlier parts of this somatics pop-up, consider re-using a story so you can approach it in a new way.

Before you write, diagram for yourself a light, easy chain of three containers or bowls, or if you like that china tea tray, some lovely bowl-like plates. Allow yourself to follow your impulse and name the three bowls. This is really wide open, so perhaps just accept the first three ideas that come to mind. (Right now, I am thinking of Yallery Brown, a folk story I rewrote for the diaphragm study. And the three things that come to mind are: names; ground and soil; colors. Those are categories, so here's another more syntactical version of a constraint, just an example: drifting tumbleweed sentences; curses; questions.)

Then retell your borrowed story, writing only the material that exists in those three bowls.

This might mean going through the story in the same chronology as before, but with an interpretive frame or emphasis belonging to the bowls. Or it might mean parsing the story into elements and presenting it outside of narrative chronology. Or it might mean retelling the story three times, with three successive angles of vision on what details matter. You might move through the bowls in series or bounce between them, or focus on only one, but let some consciousness of what sits in the others leak in. Or it might mean anything else. As always, the vagueness is an invitation to fill in the blank with your own choices. And as always, accept a "wrong" version of following the exercise as perfectly fine.

As you write, consider especially how the container can gift a sense of purpose, focus, or ongoingness to the stuff in the container. How it can also gift you a satisfaction in simplicity? How can it relieve you of the burden of a

certain pressure toward development or improvement in the Lockean sense? Is there a different feeling of the being of your story that arises when you write this way?

