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The State of Being Linked: On Will Hubbard's *Cursivism*

Cursivism, by Will Hubbard. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2011.

There seems to be some disagreement about what to call the work in Will Hubbard's first book, *Cursivism*. Rather than being labeled a collection of prose poems, it has been described as "prose that moves like poems" and "prose blocks," a distinction that is not entirely clear, but certainly points to the fact that the work feels more prose-like in its understated voice and down-to-earth subject matter. Whereas other poets working with prose poems use the form to jump into surrealist tales or bizarre juxtapositions, Hubbard stays firmly in this world, examining the effects of cancelled soccer games and spilled coffee. Still, Hubbard's associative leaps and movement in time and space, connecting personal stories with public histories, makes the prose feel like poems. It seems that Hubbard wants the reader to stay in this space between genres not simply to challenge labels, but because the form mirrors the collection's central concern of how the private and the public, seemingly separate worlds, are in fact intimately intertwined in the creation of the self.

From the beginning, Hubbard's speaker quietly announces himself—there are no titles, no sections, no epigraphs, just words presented in an unadorned block, simple and reliable like a good, sturdy chair. In the opening poem (let's just call them poems now for the sake of simplicity), Hubbard writes:

Finally, in the middle of winter, I've caused an orchid to bloom a second time. My father, in the hospital with a blood infection, still implores me not to *catch cold*. Once I carried an orchid, uncovered, many blocks through the snow. Inside, the frozen petals made clinking sounds, like a toast. I called my mother to see if there was anything I could do. *No, no*, she said, *just let it happen*.

We can see how the speaker has moved from being careless—carrying an orchid in the snow—to conscious, able to make an orchid bloom a second time. Still, the father, even in his ill state, feels the need to instruct and the mother doesn't want the speaker to worry or help. Many have this same experience, being fully in adulthood as their parents move into old age, and yet the patterns of the family that were established in childhood continue. It's difficult to acknowledge how the family is changing because the people are aging. This sense of change and mortality is quietly embedded in the poem with the few bits of speech and the delicate sound of frozen petals clinking. It makes the reader instantly trust the speaker in a way because the quietness of passing time feels true to life. This is a speaker who aims to authentically portray the world and his experience in it.

The trust established between the speaker and the reader is essential because the same speaker is persistent in every poem. All of the poems come from a clear point of view and are told with a consistently subtle, even deadpan, affectation. Sentences like, "My father once left the sprinkler on overnight and froze an entire dogwood tree" or "Being late is useful because you get to see what everyone else is doing first" highlight the everyday nature of the language of the poems. Even when the speaker moves away from his own personal experiences to tell tales about Japanese poets or ancient Peruvian cultures, there is a sense of a singular persona reading this information and rearranging it in his mind because of this unswerving voice.

In this way, Hubbard is working with the merging of public histories and private memories, how what we experience is mixed up with what we learn and remember of the past. In the fiftieth poem of the book, Hubbard writes:

A Paris mortician was once so taken by the beauty of a woman dredged from the Seine that he cast her face in plaster . . .
The cast of the woman drowned in the Seine was never identified, but marble copies of the face became popular fixtures in Bohemian households. Today it is the face used to make CPR training mannequins.

At first blush, this may seem like a made-up story. Certainly, there is irony in the fact that a drowned woman is now the face of the CPR dummy, that her face once taken in plaster became marble and now is plastic. It speaks to how we choose to remember the dead, how when you die you lose control of your image, which is tantamount to having no control over how you are remembered. However, this

story is actually true. (Anyone who listens to WNYC's show *RadioLab* would have heard the story recounted earlier this year.) Knowing that it's a true story is not essential in understanding or appreciating the poem—the themes are embedded in the weaving between stories, in the presentation of these facts. Yet, knowing that the historical anecdote is true, or at least rooted in another source, broadens the poem's scope. Just as the form of the poems hovers in a space between prose and poetry, the speaker hovers between the private and public, taking the information to inform or understand his personal experiences.

With these nods to public information, the collection moves away from the speaker's internal life, yet is also firmly planted within it. Part of that comes from the unifying voice of the poems, as well as the decision to not acknowledge the outside sources. There are no footnotes or citations for the information. Hubbard never announces where a piece of information comes from because the original source or the veracity of that source is beside the point. These facts are now very much part of the speaker. The incorporation of these public records can be seen in the forty-sixth poem of the collection:

Until the sixth century B.C., the Greeks wrote from left to right on the first line, then back from right to left on the next, and so on. The way a marble travels in grade-school friction experiments. I read that you are to be married. The calligrapher wrote my apartment number wrong, but the postman is a friend of mine. He slipped it under the door while I was shaving.

The associative leaps from ancient Greece to the elementary classroom to the wedding invitation slipped under the door mimic how the thought process works and yet are entirely specific to the speaker. No one remembers everything he learns or reads. What a person remembers, the anecdotes that stay with him, and when those anecdotes are recalled are reflections of that person's understanding of self. In this way, records of ancient Greece become completely linked to the wedding invitation because both inhabit the speaker's mind.

When considering how these personal memories merge with public records, the title of the collection comes into focus. Imagine curative text, letters linking together, jumping over the space on a page to make one unit, a word. This same act of linking is at the root of these poems. A remembered fact is as much a part of the self as a memory because both can be called in the same moment, making a whole unit, a thought. The power of these poems comes from the linking,

rather than the independent words or sentences. Linking becomes a belief system. That being said, the poems don't advocate that the self is coherent or fractured, but rather reflect the reality of being. In this way, the poems feel internal and private even as they draw on public information.