

John Rigney

## Avant-Garde: A Manifesto\*

The avant-garde doesn't ask for permission.  
It does not have a structure, a roster or an application form.  
The poetry of the avant-garde has sources but no footnotes.  
It seeks no justification in academic hallways.  
There are no blessings in dissertations.  
And no one is saved by criticism except the critic.  
The avant-garde is not seeking publication.  
The avant-garde is not a synonym for cutting-edge, hip or au-courant.  
Avant-garde is not an adjective one can use about oneself.  
I am told that the term avant-garde was first used by Olinde Rodrigues  
in 1825 to describe the artist's duty to lead the way to a new and better humanity.  
I cannot verify this, as a translation of the essay is not readily available.  
Does your avant-garde lead anyone anywhere  
other than to the wine and cheese spread at a well-funded reception?  
The avant-garde does not accept honorariums.  
The avant-garde does not want a job.  
The avant-garde is not a container for empty aesthetic posturing.  
The avant-garde lives at the forward edge of history—  
not on the promontory of stacked-up art objects  
held together with the mortar of academic jargon  
and made toxic by radioactive, self-congratulating elitist attitudes.  
The avant-garde is not a prerequisite for a Fulbright.  
The avant-garde has no use for a stipend.  
The avant-garde is a reconnaissance force for possibility.  
The avant-garde occupies the space between the now and its then—  
because that is the location where humanity loses sight of its dreams.  
If the avant-garde looks anywhere but forward it will be shot in the back of the head,  
according to the logic of its foundational metaphor.

When the avant-garde is dead it is given a name and included in an anthology.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with irrelevant chatter.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with courting stability.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with your tenure-track position.

The avant-garde is unconcerned with the avant-garde.

\*I am not now, nor ever have been a member of the avant-garde.

## The Dead Cry Out

The dead cry out  
in the silence of photographs  
which hold them, forever, in their leaving.

On the way to Tahrir Square,  
the street cleaner comes  
before the dawn of the morning after  
and pushes together a neat pile  
of pellets, petals, scraps of bloodstained ribbon, a scarf—  
an ingathering of yesterday's sacrifice  
swept up with candy wrappers, lost tickets, cigarette butts—  
the ordinary refuse of traffic  
that are the usual objects of his care.

The street is a place of our forgetting  
of dropping things  
discarding  
throwing away.  
The street is a place of our forgetting  
of walking by;  
it is there to move us, take us out, away.

It is a crime to usurp the street for remembering  
for stopping, pausing,  
standing still, so as to say  
“I know that you were here,  
and I still miss you.”  
To lay flowers on the street  
is a capital offense.

In the photograph, I see you  
held in the arms of one who can not say goodbye.  
I hear you  
weeping in the silence of an empty page.

On January 24, 2015, the poet and activist Shaimaa el Sabbagh was murdered by police as she went with a group of twenty-five others to Tahrir Square to lay a wreath at a memorial for those who died in the uprising of 2011.

**The Language**  
After Creeley, backwards

The Language  
is a mouth  
aching, speech  
of holes

and words, full  
crowd into  
mute, unspeaking  
anatomies.

Throats, gullets  
sites of transit—  
of air, and intent  
muscles'  
electric impulse  
held up  
delayed  
stopped  
on neural-net  
express ways jammed  
with  
desire  
and regret

for - to - with  
parts of speech  
become an emptiness  
between us

Love:

I say  
Everything

so much  
I want  
so

but words  
are  
in  
my eyes—  
my fingertips

and  
you  
are  
not  
here.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are holes  
to throw the past in  
which won't stop growing,  
like a weed

They are blunt  
instruments  
hurtling through  
the spaces between our solitudes  
at our helpless, mute desires

They hold us  
as if mothers and prison wardens  
were one and the same:  
tenderly and without the possibility of parole.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are the names of God  
secret, potent, unknowable.

They are  
battle maps  
execution orders  
stays  
pardons  
sentences.

They are struggles,  
contentions  
unfinished attempts  
to connect  
elusive, reluctant impossibilities.

Words mean so much, so little.

They are dreams

fading

along the curve and slant

the shapes, the forms, of letters,

crushed in the grasp of our remembering.

They are surrounded by silences

emptinesses

leaching into intention

leaving only incomplete desires.

They are acts

products of the body

things,

made

of will and air,

blood and muscle.

facts, proof, history.

Words mean so much, so little.

We try

so hard,

want

so much

to say

so much

and yet

they fail.

**“Words meant everything.”**

- Rep. John Lewis, recalling the Selma March, 2015

There is a fire made of words

letter upon letter upon letter

the alphabets of humanity

burning, burning.

Words were prison bars

made of prohibitions and exclusions

of put-downs, pass-overs, cast asides

of excuses and empty promises

of histories written on unwilling skin

of futures whispered into ears that always meant “not now”

of drive-by disillusionments

sprayed, slow motion, at the walking pace

of a man crossing to the other side of the street.

Words were ropes

thick twines, binds

reminders of arrests, incarcerations delineations

lacerate pronouns of “you” and “them.”

Words were a bed

made of straw

gathered from fields by unpaid hands

where fugitive bodies rested

soaked in the brine

of generations of flammable weeping.

There is a fire made of words  
burning, burning.

Two words became a match  
that started this conflagration:  
“no more”  
scratched against the rough surface  
of the ugly face of hatred,  
blossoming, sulfur –hissing  
into a flower of crackling refusal.

There is a fire made of words  
burning, burning.

The flames are crying out  
consuming the air in syllables of elemental desire,  
shouting against the silences  
which seek to steal our names.

There is a fire made of words  
burning and burning and burning  
exploding into dictionaries  
lexicons  
where the definitions  
of dignity  
of respect  
love  
opportunity  
safety  
justice  
now  
bear  
the name  
of  
everyone.

## Zurita

In 1973 they arrested Raul Zurita  
on suspicion of subversion against the state.  
They threw his poems, his *Purgatorio*  
(indicted as subversions, coded in unbreakable terza rima)  
into the sea.

As his pages took on water,  
wept ink,  
and drowned ,  
crying out, sea-silent  
their protests mingling with the salt-stained echoes  
of Prospero's executive, submersive, order

did Zurita, the poet, the prisoner  
as various forms of torture were applied to his body  
did Zurita think of Yeats,  
who said,  
"Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry"

And, as his body broke,  
And as the soldiers laid it on  
Did he find  
that all suffering  
is poetry?

All suffering  
is passive:  
unwilled, uninvited, unwelcome?

And that safety,  
that other , distant shore,  
          so far from home  
                  from which the sea is not a hiding place for dangerous ideas  
that safety can not be found  
      In struggle, but in letting go—  
          in sinking, silently beneath the surface  
That endurance is made not of  
      fighting  
But of doing nothing  
      Except composing  
          a poem  
                  Which waits for tomorrow's pen and paper?