

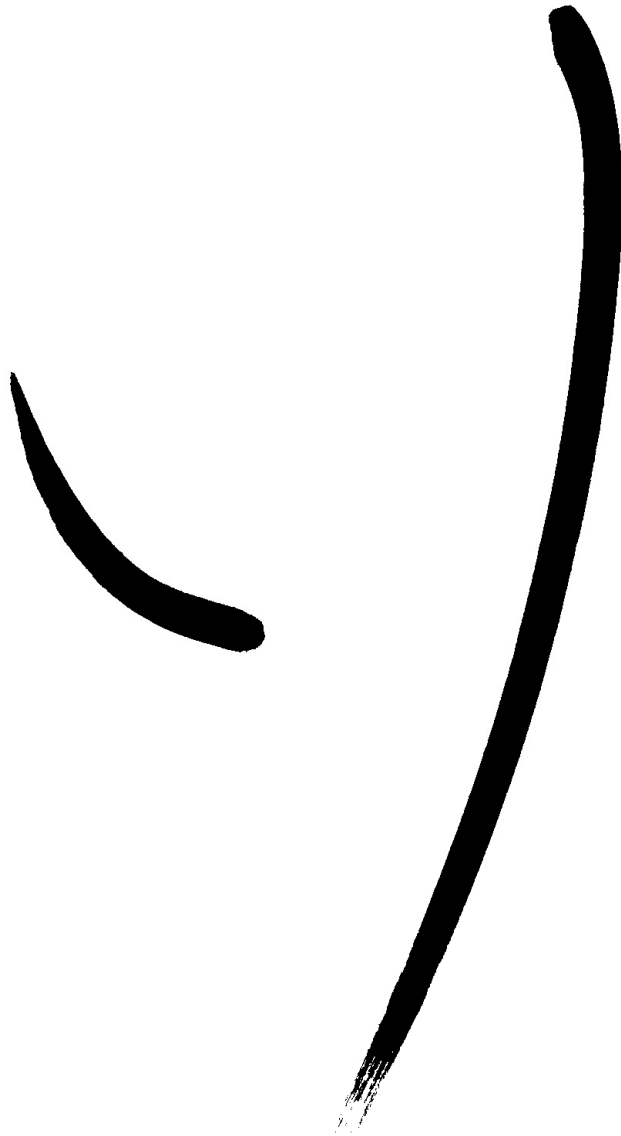
# Line and Pause

Forrest Roth

**BlazeVOX** [books]

Buffalo, New York





I feel my elemental self: I will never age a day. Cold wooden paths lead to the grand temple. Sliding my way across on socks. No one sees me—otherwise my knowledge will be lost. . . . A long hallway in abeyance. . . . At the farthest point an aperture reveals details of a room to steadily gaze upon. . . hidden light fixtures illuminate bronze-wrought lilies submerged in a flawless disc. . . . I am entering the room, and I am unafraid.

Father, downstairs. I found him. He stood facing the living room window. Hands folded neatly behind his back. I watched from the stairway—not to disturb. He seemed to stare above the homes on the other side of the road. Never looking at them.

Forgoing safe position, I walked up to his side. Tugged the sleeve of his shirt. I prodded in my faintest whisper.

“Reading,” he answered without turning his head. “The clouds.”

Whimsy—a hint—settled in his voice. I didn’t recognize it.

I fingered my nightgown. His shoulders slumped.

He sighed. “Weather reports.”

I had noticed them.

I left school early. I could sneak around the back of our home without letting Mother know I had returned. Our veranda felt comfortable outside in the bath of warm air.

The blinding sun remained fixed high above. A solitary cloud passed over. Sitting, I stared at the circle formed inside it, and continued on.

I was careless. A sunstroke hit me.

Mother may have been in disbelief finding her daughter prostrated facedown in the broken earth of her garden bed.

Her reaction that day still forces its way inward. It settles between a gasp and a cry of anger.

This, an inherited lack of precision concerning the unfathomable.

Retrieved in the bedding. An electric fan whirred about on the floor. Light breezes touched my face at regular intervals. I considered: time had moved backward. The same morning living again as when I woke up that day.

*I did it, I triumphed. So this is what Father meant!*

Until daylight waned at each passing oscillation of the fan. A headache gathered strength.

Mother came in to change the cold handtowel on my forehead.

“Kei-chan,” she scolded, “you *will* have to explain yourself when you’re better.”

She left a cup of ice water at my side.

I slipped back miserably into dreamless sleep.

He leaned forward. I felt my face turning blanch.

“You’re feeling very sick right now, aren’t you?”

Yes.

“Well, I can see it. So you know you deserve to be punished.”

Yes.

“I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll tell Mother you were just being foolish and taking a nap outside—if you promise me not to ever pull that stunt again.”

I flinched.

My parched lips mouthed inaudible words. They were not: *I was on the veranda, I had a vision, I saw no one, I asked a question in my mind, I had a vision.*

Finding prescience made a lie.

During this sleepless stretch I tried recalling the method I had used to reach the cloud. Useless. My opportunity had arrived and, with it taking advantage of me, left.

*A false promise. . . .*

I tossed in my bedding. My body grew cold. Darkness blanketed me, one layer, and the next.

I will leave home some day. Leave Mother and Father.

Question for next time: What will I do then?

They kept the viscera of animals for their holy fascinations. Ritual turned science. No one possessed the daring to misinterpret Providence's will. Seeking support for their masters (who couldn't help looking inquiringly over their shoulders as the reading took place), oracles drew characters with something other than quills. They knew exactly where they stood relative to the blood spilled on the table.

The violent aspect of his craft was never absent: what else could those clouds that passed over our quiet neighborhood be to him? Sacrifices left discarded. Emptied. Their vaporous bodies would float onwards, unaffected by the probing from below upon them. His hand—it must have been up there, reaching for the chosen animal, cutting its life away with a single stroke and pulling the entrails out.

A speculative history of sorts on a dubious practice that perhaps never existed to begin with, except in his mind.

Years later I was able to write meticulously on the notebook cover after the trembling stopped.

The ancestry of contemporary cloudwatching closely resembles the practices of augurs in service to the Roman Empire. . . . This is not to say the two schools are directly related in method. . . but only in result, and sometimes situational practice. . . .

. . . classic augurism from the Roman times was concerned with Nature—animals, birds, thunderstorms, an ill-timed sneeze. . . spelled out portents to the finely-tuned mind. . . .

The decline of augurism. . . perhaps can be attributed to its obsolescence coinciding with the fall of the Empire. Perhaps the Romans thought that Providence. . . had abandoned them to meet an undignified end in this world, without proper rites bestowed upon them by their descendants, their kin, once they had died. Nature had returned to the Romans to claim its mastery, and, in effect, throw away the shackles of divination, leaving mankind to stumble around in the darkness while it explored other diversions. . . none of which have yet returned mankind to the favors that the Romans enjoyed at their peak. . . .

Regarding the Japanese islands. . . many examples of divination—good and ill-intended—stretching back to the Heian period and beyond possibly, but none that show any direct ancestry to Roman augurism. Japanese divination lended itself to actual manipulation of time and space: spirit possession, physical alteration, curses and so forth. . . . The intercession of Amaterasu Ōmikami may have been seldom asked for because of the presence of the sons and daughters of Yamato who dispelled any notion of providential abandonment. . . . High Priestesses of the royal court were left to their own devices. . . .

Cloudwatching may also have origins among the peasant class during this time as well, so as to fulfill their own sense of connection with Amaterasu Ōmikami that perhaps the aristocracy couldn't bring them. Their own practices took what was simply around them—what was farthest from them—in plain sight: stars, sun, clouds. . . .

. . . the peasant class could not invest much in the celestial sphere. Clouds were the only things they could claim for themselves, that they felt loomed closest to their own position. To them, the tapestry of the sky provided their medium for augury, particularly since it required little material (or none at all) to make it happen. . . .

Skills involved in cloudwatching are not hereditary. . . not gifted in any way or form. The inherent talent to augur must ultimately be discovered on one's own early during childhood development, or it is completely lost; likewise, situational practice cannot be directly taught from the parent to the child.

The child must discern the methodology on its own since the young mind is less susceptible to pragmatism. . . and there proficiency can seep within.

The veranda became my hide-out. Saturday afternoons I escaped outside there with the book I tried finishing for homework. But there were only interruptions by our neighbor's tabby cat, his unwelcomed prowling through Mother's immaculate garden. These predatory surveys for mice at our home: a silent intrusion, forcing me further into the words I read. On the page I held counsel with a patient, tranquil heart, throbbing beneath rumpled orange fur dirtied from countless forays. Then his pulse would race in a flashpoint. He made his catch. He filled his mouth with warmth, familiar, brimming.

I could never fool Mother.

She snatched a letter to my grandparents from underneath my hand before I finished it. Our motivational sessions were having little effect on me. She perceived my lazy handwriting. A proposition, then, to find a tutor more skillful than herself for shodō lessons.

My fancies had remained roaming too long through fields of jonquils like so much poesy. I was figurative. Anything other than what I already cherished turned an uncertain shade.