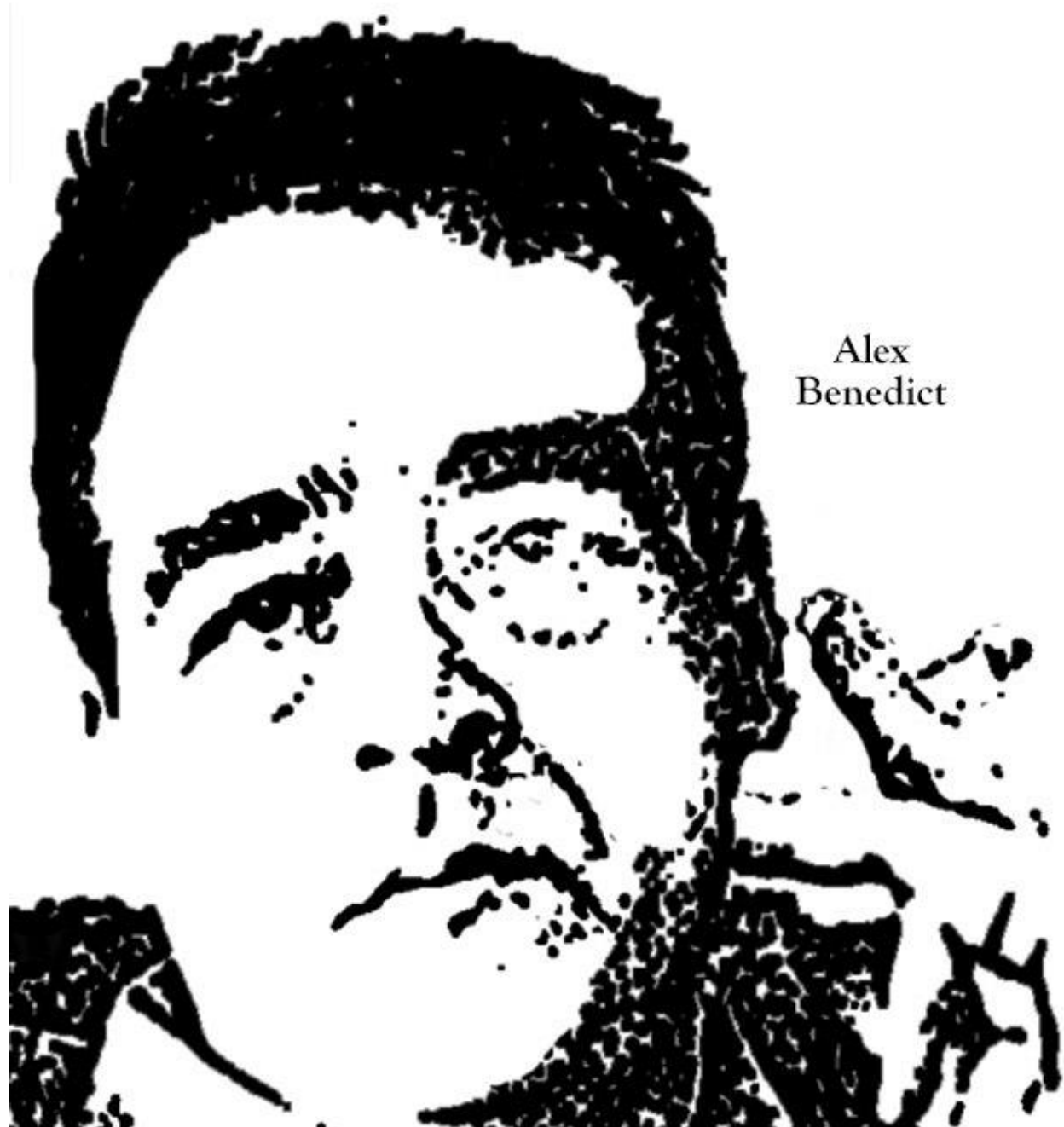


WHAT IS YOUR DANGEROUS CAREER?



Alex
Benedict

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By Alex Benedict

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For N.S. and . . .

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Writing from the steel mills of Ohio
and the organized cowardice
of another World War,
Kenneth Patchen says of himself:

I am the world-crier;
and this is my dangerous career.

Yes, the world cannot cry,
but no career can be as dangerous
as this lie
because we only cry for each other
and when we cry for ourselves
we are crying *with* the world.

This is not my work,
but I have many dangerous careers:

I am the sparrows flattening
themselves against the lakeshore
and this is the beginning
of my dangerous career.

I am the mail carrier
and this was nearly
my career of necessity.

I am the watcher
and when you fail to surface
I will dive.

I am the moth sleeping
in the warehouse of paper
and, yes, this is another
of my dangerous careers.

I was the attendant of asphalt
and, well, that *was* my dangerous career.

I am the ears that you shed
at the bus stop
and to be washed into the sewer
is still my dangerous career.

I am the salamander
and my dangerous career
is to lend you this wreath
of feathered gills.

I am the poet
and what hasn't been said
about this career?

I was the cricket in your cupboard at night
and that could have been a comfortable
career.

I am the publisher
and I make it my career to print
your dangerous words,
the words in which we will meet.

I am the nose on the wallpaper
of the cafe and this,
this could have been my day job.

I am the student
and my education can only be
the preparation for a more
dangerous education.

I operate offset printers
and I greet the dawn
with this dangerous career.

I have been the child
combing your hair harshly
and this is a career
I cannot forget.

I am the saint of empty envelopes,
and who could disagree?

I am the garbage man
and it is my dangerous career
to collect that for which
there is no place.

I am the soldier and my career is one without
decision or judgement.

I was the messenger on four legs
for death and this was
my most recent career.

I am a boiler of rice
and this, only this
is my dangerous career.

I am the revolutionary
and my career is that of
a soldier without a nation.

I am the "kicker of elves"
and this is how my friends describe
my career.

I am the staples you smashed
and the stamps you ripped,
yet my career is no small protest.

I have been the son,
I have been the father,
who has forgotten, who has lost
their career.

Sure, I ejaculate to police sirens.
That alone is my dangerous career.

I am the tailor
who passes by the stranger
at the shrine shivering

I will be your gravedigger
and you have been mine.
I have been the soil surrounding you
and you will be the soil surrounding me.

I am the hair cutter
and this is the season
of my fatal career.

I am the returning call of the Angel
and this could be the opening
of a difficult career.

I am the painter
and my career consists
in nothing less than seeing.

I am the tree reaching
and it is my dangerous career

to gather into leaves
and to be passed through
by your light.

Yes, I am the tongueless frog
bellowing a cloud of flies
into a face and anyone
can make a career from this.

I am the battering waters
suffused with sediment
and this is the apex of my career.

I am a wooden puppet, abandoned,
staring into the splinter of your eyes
and I could get used to this career . . .

I am the translator
who burrows into the green stem
of your voice.

I am the teacher
and this is a dangerous career.

I am the binding star
of the bottomless pit
and this is my career for now.

I am the performer
and my dangerous career
is being the sound that you
never knew you could share.

I am the mirror of your indifference
and mine is hardly

an inspired or reflective career.

I am the paper that you fold
and my career is to carry
your secrets into the intimacy
of no longer being secrets.

I am the seller of death
and this is the career
we've all known.

I am the crayfish
and my dangerous career
rests in the grace
of your curious hand.

I am the romantic
and what career
could be more fatal?

I am the librarian
whose dangerous career
is to order the silence
of our lives.

I am the restless sleeper
whose dreams ceaselessly
interrupt any career.

I am the lover
anticipating an answer
and this is more than an agonizing
gap in my career.

I am your reader

and my dangerous career
is devoted to you.

I am the pencil shavings
in our gums and this will be
my final and most dangerous career.

I am the biographer
and everywhere across
my dangerous careers
I see *you*, only you.

I am no priest or penitent
but I am prostrate
before your enduring career.

I am the cat's foot
coiling around your wrists
and my career remains to be gathered
into the garland of your lives.

I have no career.

I have no career.

Where our veins open to the air,
I am the ink's skin
and that is all
I could ever want to be . . .

Tear into me.

What is *your* dangerous career?
We return to necessity.

From necessity to necessity,
from shore to shore,
without hesitation
we move from working as
a necessity for survival
to working *with* necessity.

These seeds burst under rain.

We return to work from need.
We return to our work with purpose.
They whose labor has no end
are still to be born.

There can be no other career.
This work begins before birth.

We are born continuously
and our labor is without exhaustion.

Our seeds are as the rain.

Our labor is to make this end clear.
Our acts become transparent to themselves.

I've heard we are tasked
with making the world invisible,
but I've succeeded only
in myself becoming translucent
under your touch.

What then is there to see
when your gaze can no longer
carry light?

Nothing. Your gaze is light.
We order nothing
and our path is straight
because we see each other
before seeing ourselves.

I reach into you
I reach into you,
but there is nothing to hold
but holding.

The sheet tears
and for a moment
these lines of labor
and even this light
fall from our faces.

SHOP RAGS, or "The Venation Notebooks"

Know, also, that there is nothing
more common than the misery
of generosity . . .

A poem
is like a pallet-jack
because
it isn't.

My fingerprints and footsteps
travel and disappear along
the rising edge of the paper.

They who ride
the pallet-jack like the boat of Ra
into the warehouse of fire and night
will claim their mouth
and inhale your speech
to speak beneath your skin.

We leave and the warehouse is quiet.
The pale deer
abandons its antlers

in the smoke
of the Turkish cafe.

You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the
perfect type of the perfect pleasure. It is
exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What
more can one want? Yes, Dorian, you will always

be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins
you have never had the courage to commit.

— Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray, Lord
Henry

Late summer . . .
open warehouses of Berea Rd.
rainwater glasses
The pear's skin
peeling off
onto the back
of the barcode.
Bike chain caught
on another dawn —
screw wearing loose
your laughter
Piles, piles, piles,
your sensations and thoughts,
each and every dog-eared sheet
thrown into paranoia.

Unrecognizable, the marks
made with and without intention.
The pale leaves
of your eyes turn
from me in shame and wither,
wither reaching, wither kneeling.

My hands hold nothing but this laughter.
I piss data.

My desire
dissolves yours
in its saliva of
discontent.

Enter the stream.
My lamp was deflowered.
The flower had no name.

Wreath our iron wolf bookend
with your floss.

Our Saints are continually falling
into the mouth of morning.

Fallen, on what ground do we meet?
I spit compassion.

Your distance
chrysalises me
in dispassion.

Tear out from this womb.
The sky crawls
with transparent hair.

I bury my teeth
in the stomach
of dawn.

I eat its eyes
with enthusiasm.

Who is it now that speaks?
I have been blinded
by your light, no,

I have been blinded by
your sight.
The faces on this road

decay into light,
and the fields heap
themselves into rot.
I was not there
sleeping beside you.

I cannot be the hands
that combed your hair.

I am not here
on the page.

Lower me
into the writhing ground.
Share my discomfort.

You wear this pain
as well as any
one could.

I collect your hearing names.
I have nothing further to say than *you*.

Rest now in the lost, laughing
shadows of this quiet harbor.

Lost? We meet
each and every morning
across my Grandmother's table.

The lakefront trees are bare
and glowing with pietas.
A small funeral,
a burial . . .
with no one to bury

and everything to dig up.

A face flecked with dark mud
asks after the direction
of these living ashes.

The grass is slow.
It's many tongues have only one direction,
but who will speak with the roots?
You fill my chest with sparrows.

They eat our children
and rip my lungs into
a hundred hoarding voices.

I'll inherit every throne
and crush them with the expanses
of my heart.
Words, words, . . .
permeable, penetrating.

They can be pressed no further
without breaking skin.

Press them instead into my gums
where they can dissolve
with the cavities
of your memory,
not empty but
a devouring absence.

Break the hours
against your unwallled body.

Know that my sleep

is only an undercurrent
for this day.

Golden ivy creeps from your smile.
Surfaces, surfaces, . . .
bright, blunt,
veins snagged and torn
across that swelling lake,
pelted with the suffocating rain
of your youth.

Under the leaves and stones,
the frogs still sleep.
Peel the wallpaper from your throat.

I'll sit with this guilt
and wait for its answer.

Slugs pass on the windowsill.

I am no seducer.

My deception is the final
passion of self-defeat.

Suspended with the sediment
of the river, I am carried
to you.

Alone, alone, . . .
I shed your empathy.

We no longer print this disease.

Pollinate my procession.

We pass through convulsions
of handless gardens . . .

Mountain my grief
that never could be
provoked.

A kid I have fallen into milk

drowned without disappearance
into the center of your vision.
No, that is not me
walking the empty street.

Who could ever have seen me?

I hear you speak
through the night
of glowing words.

The days have many faces.

I am in your stare.

Face me.

A PRINTING PARABLE

They bring the blank stock in
and we ship the inked stock out.

The operator guides the paper through the press
to the cutter, bindery, and mail.

The paper, the paper rises, rose,
as trimmed and fitted marble blocks.

The operator pulls and scans sheets
in search of secret speech.

The paper says nothing but:
"Let me dry for a moment.
I will speak to you then."

Dry, the sheet only smiled
like an early sacrifice
on the drafting table.

Gathering their children,
the operator commented:
"Oh, wicked and desolate souls
with the look of a formal French garden."

At once, the sheets shed their colors.

The paper continued to rise, rose,
encircling them as a flock of sparrows.

Stacked without consideration
for climbing, future faces shimmer
in its glossy coating.

We did not fall like ink,
but jackals in the warehouse of paper
eat our hearts tonight.

No temple, but the text,
the text that moves along the edge
of your magenta thumb
in the shadow of stock.

We did not fall as angels,
but we all share shitty coffee.

They did not fall, no,
the operator was crushed
by a doubled skid of #100 GLOSS TEXT 23x29.

There remains the inexplicable mass of paper,
towering over you,
towering over the bridges,
towering over the gods.

You are laid out dead on the page
in preparation for the following morning.

Why ask any more?
Why say any more?

One stares at the tiles in the washroom and, in
staring, sees in their pale brilliance the film
of one's own eyes. Defecating into the clear
water of that ever-accepting bowl, dizzy,
relieved, and emptied, numb with buzzing

fluorescence to return to the noise of paper feeding into those steel and rubber cylinders. Ah, and the smell of solvent, pervasive as, pervasive as, pervasive as . . . to be unnoticeable, the ink's color and position shifting slightly through every sheet in response to your movements, your skin, your fingerprints peeling back over themselves at the threshold of your fingertips, translucent, the water coating the absence of the image on its plate, the blood from your cuts crossed with lines of yellow, magenta, cyan, and black, front and back, the air lifting and pulling you through that colorful embrace, the water, the water, all you ever wanted to be was the water in the absence of the image and here you are, the water in the absence of the image, the eyes that consume their own face . . . but, no, with the evaporating solvent you wipe the ink from each and every surface. You take a moment to rest on the catwalk and your heart loosens itself under the shuddering movement of the press. And you stare at where the cylinders meet, idling, the shadows receding, feeding the soft blue blankets and stainless steel. You imagine, you see, you reach into the cylinders and now you recall that morning, the green fly unmoving in the cyan ink of the fountain, then flattened into a loss of wings. You imagine, you see, you reach . . . first your nails burn brightly, then your fingers are torn violently from you. There can be nothing but acceptance. At once, your hands are pressed upward into the embrace of new palms. Here begins the ecstasy of the arms breaking into this foreign form, their

proper form; and, at this loss of time, we are left prostrate before the machine, in the machine, before the machine, before the machine recognizes and succumbs to your desire, a volition preceding yourself and the machine. Yes, now, we are pulled fully through the cylinders wet with ink, water, and solvent. We pass through comfortably accompanied by flocks of sparrows. We pass through comfortably, that is, without any sensation, exchanging this death with many faint lives, impressions gaining clarity sheet after sheet, day after day, mind after mind, leaf after leaf. Even the spirits at the edge of the forest city tire of playing with our living corpses. Even dead air continues to travel through strange throats. So, you pass through the printing press. You've passed through its architecture of breath. You collect yourself. What do you collect? What is there to collect? What can be collected now? You ask yourself: "Has anything changed?" No. What were your expectations? None. Perhaps then you have changed? Yet the light pierces you all the same in its harsh ambivalence. You ask yourself: "What then is left but to pass through the machine again?" With the teeth of dawn, with invisible hands, you now approach its thin, hissing lips unafraid.

Alexander Benedict is the editor of betweenthehighway, and he operates offset presses for a living in Cleveland, Ohio. He is also the author of the thesis "litany of the green lion," which he is developing into a biography on Cleveland poet and publisher d.a. levy. He has had two books of poetry and German translation published: "Fragments of a Mirrored-Voice for a Friend" (Above / Ground) and "OFFHANDEDLY" (Ethel Zine). Recently, he has had two critical essays published: "waste is a form of devotion" (Community Mausoleum) and "From Requiems to Elegies" (Periodicities).