

When I say the first line of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our father who art in heaven...' I imagine this heaven as invisible, unreachable but intimately close. There is nothing baroque about it, no swirling infinite space or stunning perspective-shortening. To find it - if one had the grace - it would only be necessary to lift up something as small and as at hand as a pebble or a salt-cellar on the table. Perhaps Cellini knew this.

'...thy kingdom come...' The difference is infinite between heaven and earth, yet the distance is minimal. As Weil wrote concerning this sentence: 'Here our desire pierces through time to find eternity behind it and this happens when we know how to turn whatever happens, no matter what it is, into an object of desire.'

His words might also be a prescription for the art of painting.

When I say the first line of the Lord's Prayer: 'Our father who art in heaven . . .' I imagine this heaven as invisible, unenterable but intimately close. There is nothing baroque about it, no swirling infinite space or stunning foreshortening. To find it – if one had the grace – it would only be necessary to lift up something as small and as at hand as a pebble or a salt-cellar on the table. Perhaps Cellini knew this.

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For many years, my walks have taken me down an old fencerow in a wooded hollow on what was once my grandfather's farm. A battered galvanized bucket is hanging on a fence post near the head of the hollow, and I never go by it without stopping to look inside. For what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth. The old bucket has hung there through many autumns, and the leaves have fallen around it and some have fallen into it. Rain and snow have fallen into it, and the fallen leaves have held the moisture and so have rotted. Nuts have fallen into it, or been carried into it by squirrels; mice and squirrels have eaten the meat of the nuts and left the shells; they and other animals have left their droppings; insects have flown into the bucket and died and decayed; birds have scratched in it and left their droppings or perhaps a feather or two. This slow work of growth and death, gravity and decay, which is the chief work of the world, has by now produced in the bottom of the bucket several inches of black humus. I look into that bucket with fascination because I am a farmer of sorts and an artist of sorts, and I recognize there an artistry and a farming far superior to mine, or to that of any human. I have seen the same process at work on the tops of boulders in a forest, and it has been at work immemorially over most of the land surface of the world. All creatures die into it, and they live by it.



*The Real Prayers Are Not the Words, but
the Attention that Comes First*

The little hawk leaned sideways and, tilted, rode the wind. Its eye at this distance looked like green glass; its feet were the color of butter. Speed, obviously, was joy. But then, so was the sudden, slow circle it carved into the slightly silvery air, and the squaring of its shoulders, and the pulling into itself the long, sharp-edged wings, and the fall into the grass where it tussled a moment, like a bundle of brown leaves, and then, again, lifted itself into the air, that butter-color clenched in order to hold a small, still body, and it flew off as my mind sang out oh all that loose, blue rink of sky, where does it go to, and why?

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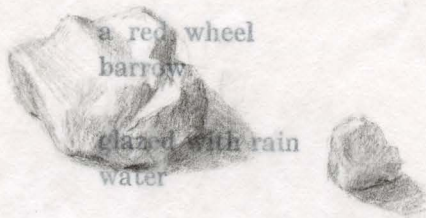
XXII

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens



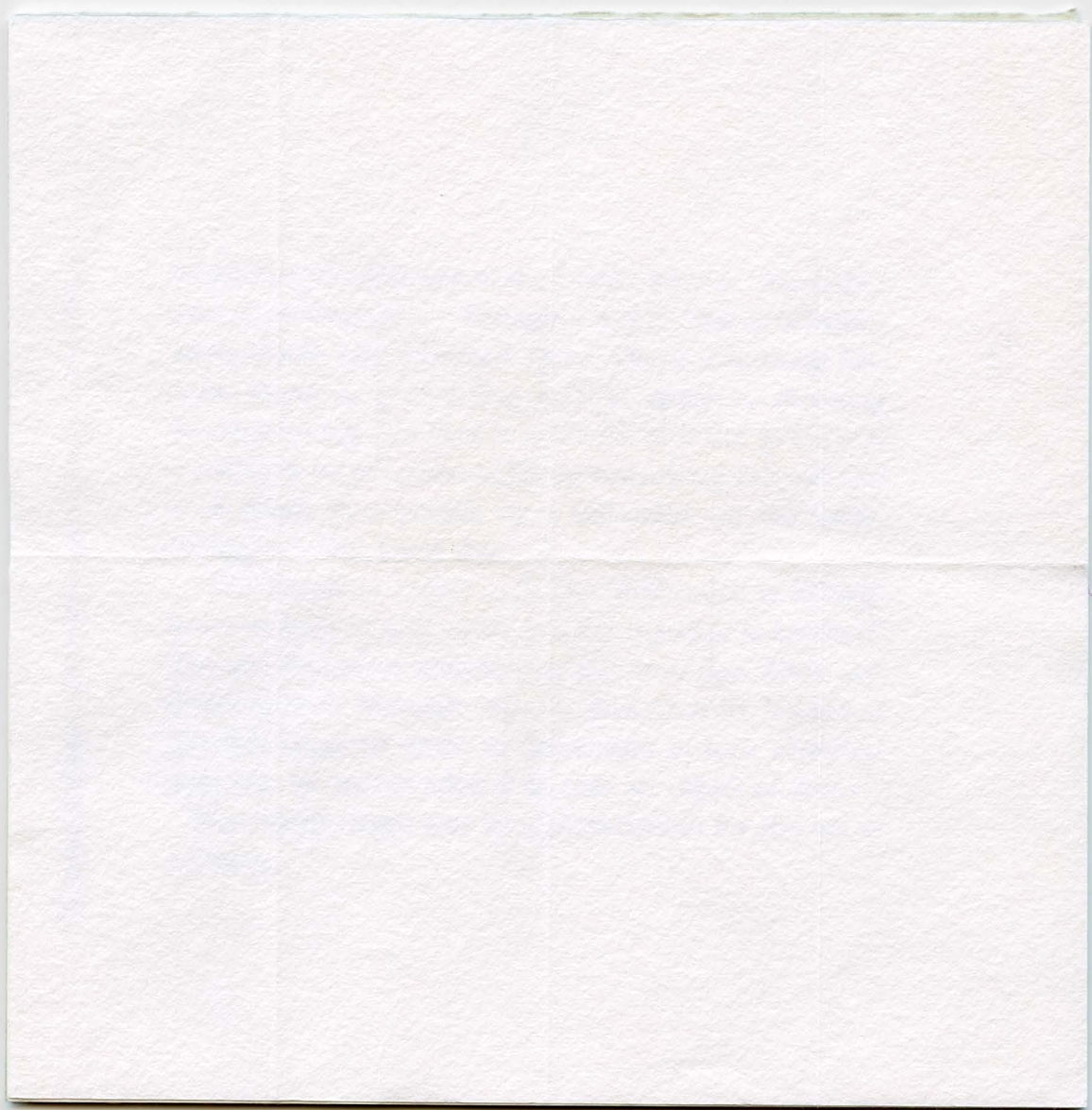
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“so much depends...”

Artist book by Sheldon Till-Campbell

Edition of 12 made for Iris Bernblum’s grad seminar *Pleasure Theft* at UIC, Fall 2024, one for each participant in the class, offered as a gift.

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