



Holdings

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Holdings*

Bruce Taylor†

“Holdings” was written for the 2011 Reading Artifacts Summer Institute at the Canada Science and Technology Museum. I spent a week “embedded” with the group, attending workshops and instructional sessions, mostly in a warehouse filled with curious objects from the museum’s collection: a gigantic hard drive platter, an egg-sorting machine, fire engines, iron lungs, a scale model of a Babbage Difference Engine (which had been used to weigh down the back of somebody’s rear-wheel-drive car). Some of the artifacts were historically important, and some were disarmingly ordinary. Others had come loose from their stories, and were just mystifying. The group spent five days exploring the innumerable intersections between these solid things and the people who lived, and live, among them. At the end of the week, during the closing presentations, I read this poem to the group about what I’d seen and felt as I watched them work.

After I’ve said it aloud, this poem will last
(if what Dag¹ said was true) for half a decade, maybe,
on a film of ferrous crystals
bonded to the disk on which I’ve stored it.
But even after it is emptied of its text
the mechanism will be somewhere,
telling someone of the skillful hands
that turned its spindle, wound its coils,
and cast the little actuator arm that reaches out
to pluck each letter from the spinning platter,
like a goldfinch picking up a seed,
then drops it on a screen for me to read:
and what it says — or what it says I’ll say —
is that these bits of manmade matter matter,
not just because they’ve lasted till today
and might be here when we are not,
or once possessed the power to play, display, replay

* Received 15 August 2012.

† Bruce Taylor (PhD, University of Toronto, 1993) has published four books of poetry. His most recent collection is *No End in Strangeness* (Comorant, 2011). He lives in Wakefield, Quebec.

¹ Dag Spicer is Senior Curator of the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California. He attended the Summer Institute.

the software of an insubstantial thought,
encrypted on chromium oxide,
inked on lambskin or impressed in clay,
but also because our fingerprints are on them
our memory is in them,
and they should be kept.

Or else they should be thrown away.

For obviously we can't keep everything,
and all our eggs have got
to be candled and graded,
coaxed through a slot
and rolled down their slanted canals,
to a place we have chosen.
And "where there is choice," as we've learned,
"there is culture";² and, in turn,
where there is culture
somewhere nearby you'll find
the pitiless curator with his mind
made up, a loupe in one hand
and a bonesaw in the other,
doing the task the rest of us refuse,
prepared, as someone has to be, to choose
the things our culture can't afford to lose.

And these were the things we nearly lost —
that nearly went over the transom
when the ship set sail,
or slipped from someone's pocket by the trail
but were retrieved, and saved from just becoming,
as lost things will, imaginary,
like the Mona Lisa's ankles
or the catalogues of Callimachus, or the grail.

Still, it is a curious future they have come to. Here's
a wooden stake that stood for years
up to its neck in mud and ice;
and here is an intricate device

² The excellent phrase "Where there is choice there is culture" is from an introductory talk given by David Pantalony, Curator of physical sciences and medicine, who coordinates RASI.

used for ballast in the trunk of someone's car;
and things that were scrawled on, sprawled on, baked in smoke
and used till they went out of style, or broke,
and fell asleep one day, then suddenly awoke
inside this well-lit warehouse,
where they were
cleaned with swabs, and laid
on little pads the conservation angels made
to hold them, swaddled and coddled,
and gently interrogated by
respectful strangers, wearing gloves.

It looks I must say, like a kind of love,
the tenderness we lavish on them.
And one could almost swear
that some of them are glad.
(Though others seem to pine for lives they had,
and yearn to be picked up again and used,
like that Elizabethan bow saw, over there,
whose handle calls out to my hand
to lift it up once more and draw
a few quick saw-strokes in the air.)

For here in the afterlife of objects,
they are kept still and somewhat whole
and made to stay unchanged,
like pure ideas, like an equation, or a soul.

In an old museum, once, I saw a strange display,
really the last thing I expected:
an old professor of anatomy, or at least the upper half of him
soaking in a tank of formalin,
with sections of him expertly dissected,
calm as a buddha, quite at rest
having become, at last, what he'd professed:
anatomy. An artifact, in fact. And instead of screaming
and running away
I stood a while and looked him over, there
in the room they had supplied for guests like me to stare
at richly informative displays like him,
and tried to admire his flexor radialis
and the transverse fibres of his carpal tract

attempting to abstract
 some living knowledge from the naked artifact.
 Which is of course, the work
 (which any museum visitor must do)
 of reconverting things to thoughts,
 things that were built, perhaps, to make a thought come true —
 A snarl of wires made for launching words,
 a hard drive as big as a table,
 a periodic table in the shape of an Art Deco lamp,
 intriguing things in which the hard and soft
 are strangely mingled,
 all of it complexly intertwined,³
 fanning out in all directions,
 twining back from everywhere at once,
 in loops of likeness and connection,
 running like a velvet rope
 from what we had today for lunch
 to William Osler's mentor's microscope.⁴

We've brought them here, I think
 to help us fashion
 places inside us large enough to hold a world,
 but small enough to carry,
 as a mother holds
 her child who holds a doll,
 and as a dim revolving model of the world
 can hold that child's attention for a moment,
 and whisper to her what the future holds.
 Outside these walls the world unfolds
 its endless objects on its endless shelf
 in the infinite museum of itself.⁵

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³ The word "intertwined" was coined by Information Technology theorist Ted Nelson.

⁴ The objects mentioned in the poem are mostly museum artifacts we researched and discussed.

⁵ The "dim revolving model of the world" in the closing lines is a permanent exhibit at the museum: I stood for a while and watched a girl watching it go around.