

# On Mass Hysteria

goya, the painter, believed  
there is no difference  
between the insanity  
of the asylum & the insanity  
of the crowd

::

when i say mass i mean of course  
a gathering of bodies

when i say mass of course  
i mean a gathering for prayer

::

at a demonstration in oakland  
to protest the light sentence  
of oscar grant's murderer

i stood in a crowd of many white  
faces shouting— i am oscar grant

a handful were wearing white paper  
masks printed with an image  
of the dead black man's face

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on the train earlier that day  
i nodded at a policeman  
& the policeman nodded back

::

goya, the painter, painted  
the same figure into two paintings

dark man with a pained face  
pointed up at god

in one he's in a parade  
drowning in celebration

in the other he's in a madhouse  
holding the whip

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the grasshopper's oft mistook  
for the locust

it's believe when they gather  
in swarms a chemical changes their brain  
& makes them want to eat the world

::

goya, the painter, is begging  
the question

who's more deranged  
the viewer or subject?

who carries the wound  
the one who wields the lash  
or the one who bears it?

::

when i say mass  
i also mean the quantity  
of matter in a body

::

i cannot see a white crowd  
& not not look to history

not not see all the mad  
reasons people gather

::

in 1500's rome a plague broke out  
where the victims suffered dancing

it's funny until you learn  
there was no end

until you look at the figures  
of how many dead

::

perhaps mass hysteria  
is a cousin of empathy.  
your neighbor weeps  
so you weep. your neighbor  
needs a man dead  
so you kill him.

::

in the catholic tradition  
the congregation participates  
in the collective delusion  
of eating the body of their god

but none would dare say

i am jesus christ

::

men strung up like cans of paint  
witches drowned in the river  
the bomb dropped upon your own city  
riots that followed the rites of spring  
& riots that follow the giants' victory

::

perhaps empathy's nothing more  
than your junkie cousin

who spends the night only to run  
off with your black & white TV

::

perhaps we should let the locusts  
swarm the museums, eat the wheat fields  
from all the dead painters' paintings

::

even as a child

i felt the pulse

quicken in my neck

as the crowd

surged around

two boys

fists clenched

trying to paint

the other

the other red