



April 2, 2018

Dear Dennis,

I didn't come looking for you, I just loved your bench. I saw it in a photograph and asked my friend if I could come in person to her grandparents' yard to see it. Cracked and aging, your bench sat at the edge of the grass surrounded by fall leaves. As I walked up to it I knew right away that I needed to get to know it better. I measured every length and angle, trying to understand it from all sides, the ways the parts fit together to make the whole. It wasn't until afterward I learned that this beautiful and strange piece of outdoor furniture was made by an artist, that you had made it. I worked to piece together what I could of the events of your life and your death, trying to find out what I could from the people who are still alive to remember.

As you know, your bench is made of eight brownstone panels, two and a half inches thick, that fit together vertically and horizontally to make its legs, seat, and back. I decided to re-construct your bench, twice. I made two of each panel, casting them in concrete in my studio with white Portland cement and extra fine white sand. Some of the shapes make sense—a triangle, a square, a parallelogram—while others are irregular and unpredictable, nearly impossible to memorize with accuracy. Of my sixteen panels, I made eight of them the lightest pink, and assembled them together into a bench the way you did. The other eight panels I kept distinct and disassembled, leaning them on the walls in a row. The eight shapes range in weight from 45 pounds (the small triangle) to 320 pounds (the seat), and when trying to apprehend what these calculated numbers mean, I found myself comparing them to people—the anonymity and specificity of these numbers reminding me of the bodies of children and adults of various sizes—45 pounds, 75 pounds, 76 pounds, 90 pounds, 107 pounds, 209 pounds, 282 pounds, 320 pounds. Could I pick up the body of a person of this size? When I mix up the liquid concrete and pour it into the molds, it takes three days for the liquid to cure into a solid. I cover the just-poured panel with a blanket, and when I come back to my studio a day later the curing concrete is hot like a sleeping body, a puff of warm humid air released into my face when I fold back the blanket to check on it. Another day and a half later it is cold to the touch, rock hard and dead weight. It lets off a musty odor for another two weeks as it fully hardens.

I can't deadlift a 100-pound bag of sand or cement, but if I slide it one side at a time out of my car and onto a cart I can get it into the freight elevator and up to my studio on my own, just barely. I slice the bags open and scoop the materials out into the mixing bucket a pound at a time, mixing in the water and then decanting the hundreds of pounds of liquid concrete a 2-quart-bucket at a time into the lubed-up wood mold I've prepared. Once the concrete is solid, I need help with every aspect of making this work. I can lift only the smallest panel, the triangle, on my own; I have needed help getting all the others up and out of their molds, turning them over to sand the edges on the other sides, wrapping them, moving them, unwrapping them again. A friend of mine exclaimed to me while helping me lift one —“This is both very heavy and extremely fragile!” The bench cannot be assembled without a team of seven people, three of whom lay the 320-pound seat down onto the legs that the other three simultaneously shift into precisely the right locations to align the notches in its underside, allowing it all to snap together into a useable piece of furniture. These people not only need to be strong enough to lift the concrete panels, but also need to work together as a collective body to negotiate the task of assembling it. I've lost count of how many people helped me make this work. Many of them were paid for their help lifting and moving, while others offered their assistance freely—friends, my boyfriend, members of my family.

I'm told that you were small—taller than me though, and probably stronger, wiry. Who helped you with your bench? I wish I could ask you how you designed it, which shape you drew first and how you figured out how to fit them all together. The original paperwork is gone, and it is seeming like I will never know the exact year you made it, although it is not unlikely that it was 1983, the same year I was born, 34 years after you were, both in Massachusetts, just miles apart. If this was the year you made your bench, that would mean that you were the same age I am now, and that you had only six more years to live, although you would have no way of knowing that at the time. You didn't even have your diagnosis for another couple of years, and even then it was not understood what was happening. I can't tell if the square panel that is now leaning on the long vertical panel in the back is where you originally had it, or if it was somewhere else and broke off and was leaned there temporarily, and eventually permanently. I have reproduced the design as I found it. I wish I could ask you if I have it right.

When your bench was finished, did you look at it and feel how I feel? When the parts slid into each other and held each other up, did you think it was beautiful? Satisfying? The way it fits together, I feel it in my whole body. It reminds me of the time I went to the Noguchi Museum and felt overwhelmed by the sexuality of the interlocking stone pieces, confused at getting so aroused from looking at abstract sculpture. Wondering if other people feel this too. Did you sit down on your bench? Did you lie on it and let your arms and legs hang down off the sides? I have devised a dance in which I touch every surface of it with my body, draping myself over and around it in one pose after another while everybody watches.

Did you know that if you lean all the panels individually against the wall in a row they look like an as-yet-unknown alphabet? Like something to try to read, but you can't make out the letters. The way an A is a triangle, but getting more complicated from there. I wonder if you ever had them arranged that way, when they were waiting to be moved perhaps. 1,200 pounds of abstract characters, written to a distant future or past time.

(I've sometimes morbidly joked to friends that I became a sculptor in order to make my eventual death a maximum pain in the ass for everyone who cares about me. What to do with all these heavy objects?)

I'll be direct—there is very little left of you. There are a few images of your works, a couple of press clippings, one other outdoor sculpture, and the memories of your friends, who told me what they could about you as best they could. There were some questions I couldn't ask. They advised me not to try to find your sister. So many people didn't live through it, I can guess that many other people you knew also didn't make it, and I can't call them up to ask about you. What room did you spend your last days in? What furniture held your body? How did it feel to be so reliant?

I hope this letter reaches you. Your bench came to me just when I needed it, and I really hope you are all right with my re-constructions of it. I have loved getting to know it, and you, and the way all the parts fit together.

Yours truly, Gordon