

*tripwire*  
a journal of poetics



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edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck

issue one  
spring 1998

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*Editors' Notes*

The original impulse behind Tripwire came out of a perceived lack of, and genuine interest in, venues for emergent and established writers and artists to articulate their poetics.

We hope to provide an open forum for such discussions, to promote critical thought and community, dialogue and debate, reflection and provocation. In an effort to broaden the conversation, this inaugural issue is open-ended and not restricted to one particular theme; it functions rather as an initial sampling of what some writers and artists are grappling with. Future issues will focus on themes which seem to represent pervasive and shared concerns among those attending these conversations.

The theme for issue two is **Writing as Activism: The Aesthetics of Political Engagement**. While questions surrounding the relationship (if any) between art and political practice have confronted writers and artists for years, each generation must take up these considerations anew. The specific material and historical conditions of the contemporary moment seem to demand a reconfiguration of how the artist confronts her place and time, and in what ways a politically engaged practice might articulate itself aesthetically, beyond traditional and inherited notions of "politics," "art," "efficacy," and the like. While we in no way expect any easy "answers"—nor do we even expect all respondents would necessarily argue for a conflation of aesthetic and political concerns—we nonetheless feel it is crucial to address (once again) the fundamental issues of how (or if) the artist can (or should) make a critical intervention into a culture and society in crisis. As in Tripwire 1, we hope to generate the broadest possible discussion in terms of what brings writers and artists to these questions again and again, what constitutes activism, what a poetry of political concern might look like, and how a critical social awareness—to one's moment, one's identity, one's history—enacts itself in one's work.

In addition to essays addressing this theme, Tripwire invites submissions of translations, art and book reviews, interviews, and visual art. All visual art submissions should be reproducible in black and white; visual artists are encouraged to include a statement about their work and their concerns. The deadline for issue two is July 15, 1998. Unsolicited submissions cannot be returned without SASE.

**erratum**

in the table of contents, the title of  
Yedda Morrison's piece should read:

*integrity, my bold new fragrance*

**contents**

<b>Noah de Lissovoy</b> <i>Some Notes for the Imagination</i>	1
<b>Eleni Sikelianos</b> <i>Eternals</i>	4
<b>Kathy Lou Schultz</b> <i>Talking Trash, Talking Class</i>	10
<b>Carolyn Castaño</b> <i>Recent Drawings</i>	16
<b>Rodrigo Toscano</b> <i>Notes on the Great Strike of '97</i>	24
<b>Sarah Anne Cox</b> <i>dear history,</i>	28
<b>Elizabeth Robinson</b> <i>A Poetics</i>	32
<b>Tan Lin</b> <i>Interview for an Ambient Stylistics</i>	34
<b>Yedda Morrison</b> <i>integrity, my brand new fragrance</i>	41
<b>Sarah Rosenthal</b> <i>Dear Yedda</i>	48
<b>Robert Hale</b> <i>Poetics Statement I &amp; II</i>	52
<b>Jocelyn Saidenberg &amp; Brian Strang</b> <i>from Record 1.0</i>	56



<b>Tim Davis</b> <i>Opiates of the Muses</i>	62
<b>Michelle Rollman</b> <i>Four Drawings</i>	65
<b>Elizabeth Treadwell</b> <i>These Are Not My Theories (&amp; People in It)</i>	70
<b>Myung Mi Kim</b> <i>Generosity as Method: Excerpts from a Conversation</i>	75
<b>Dana Lomax</b> <i>Dialogue in Translation</i>	86
<b>David Buuck</b> <i>Writing Degree Xerox</i>	92
<b>Molly Hankwitz</b> <i>Romantic Lure</i>	99
<b>BULLETINS:</b>	
<b>Poetry Center Archives at San Francisco State University:</b> <i>An Open Letter to President Corrigan</i>	101
<b>Thiagarajah Selvanithy</b> <i>Writing in Extremity / Two Poems</i>	105
<b>REVIEWS:</b>	
<b>Mark Wallace</b> <i>A Reading of Against: Juliana Spahr as Poet, Editor, and Critic</i>	110
<b>Sherry Brennan</b> <i>make shift</i>	122
<b>CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES</b>	142

*Some Notes for the Imagination*

An intersection of the political and the imaginative is in this, that the material of the human mind is the whole world. So living becomes a creative act. Political praxis is a dive into a collective re-imagining. Conversely, the imagination proposes a practical task. The poem is being used by the grammar, understood in a large sense. History.

\*

The imagination reflects the movement of the forms of things in time. Not just the *forms*, but the *forms of things*.

\*

Revolution means imagination. A metamorphosis. It is motivated by the needs of the moment. Like a baby, frustrated, straining to put two words together: for a purpose. One is thrust forward. Held out against the living social plasma of other subjects. Infectious.

\*

The individual is held taut in a series of contradictions that leave it flailing. These become internalized, it being impossible to figure the actual dilemma. Only the collective subjectivity can act against the outside in a way that crystallizes a single contradiction that can potentially be overcome.

\*

There is something for which we want to use the vocabulary of emotions, but wrongfully. The experience of the structural integrity of social meaning. Not the feeling of being connected to others, but the actual connection. It's not a feeling. This is operative.

•

We walked into a consciousness. It has an address, just like the doorway our shoes took us through. So there is a going outside into the world that is not a going outside, but a staying in one place. A confrontation with the contradictions of one's social being. A more fundamental project than the divagations of psychological or "spiritual" interrogations. The latter refer to ideas of "self" or "selflessness." But what about the means by which selves are produced? (The machinery that produces the self.)

•

People are burnt up by days. The double sense of this: the one economic—the daily sale and consumption of a labor power; the other social—one's being told moment to moment by a history that's external. The agony is not the living itself, but its alienation. The alienation of the productive power from the producer, and the alienation of the means of creating history from the self.

•

So the imagination is exploited. Not only in the sense of being employed toward the production of a surplus, but furthermore, to the extent that it reproduces these objective relations of exploitation within itself. In other words, in rationalizing and universalizing to itself the particular relations of capital in which it is embedded, the imagination exploits its own power to figure the outside. Thus setting up a hall of mirrors, an optics that denies its authentic agency in the world.

•

Poetry creaks more or less eagerly toward the accomplishment of the small tasks allotted to it in this context. How best (quietly, quickly) to dispose of a quantum of imaginative surplus that has somehow escaped other circuits. Do we cooperate in this *harmless* incineration? Campfires at the edges of the engine, what stray impulse is lying around to toss in, send off a few sparks...

•

Or is there another kind of acting? Against this "system" there is no wildness. Disruptions of the exploitation of physical and imaginative labor only appear chaotic from the standpoint of the entrenched, familiar chaos. Rebellions are logical. Whether or not they are premeditated according to our juridical definitions. The "unconscious" is not the artifact of an individual psychical economy, but of a collective political regime. Unconscious to who?

•

The whole faith of a scientific revolutionism rests on the understanding that there is a limit beyond which people cannot be pushed without engendering insurrection. Within the individual, the imagination is crossed by a corresponding boundary. After this point, in order to preserve a horizon for itself, the imagination rebels. Then poetry starts, startled, headed in a *direction*—

# Eternals

Angelos Sikelianos was a poet writing between 1905 and 1951. He was a Greek poet. As an American, I can hardly understand what this means.

I am writing this from Greece. They say that ninety-five percent of the population here writes poetry. When Odysseus Elytis's new book comes out, 10,000 copies will sell in thirty days. Something different happens with poetry here; something different happens in it. My great-grandfather writes a very Greek poetry. Even though (or because) I read it in translation, I can hardly understand it. To me, it is grandiose, inflated, bombastic. He says things like "Deep within my soul..." What is he saying?

Every Greek I meet seems to speak, at least some percentage of the time, in terms of eternals. As an American, I can hardly understand what they say. It looks like a lot of air. This interests me. In this room looking over Delphi's port, I wonder about the contemporary limitations placed on eternity, but also about the possibility that one can lose the capacity to touch upon its largesse.

I am really very often interested in the thing that one is (explicitly or implicitly) not allowed to do. In high school we were not "allowed" to skip Math, and so I did. I skipped Math, English, History and Human Sexuality, five days a week, for nearly four years. In late 20th century avant-garde (or whatever you want to call it) American poetry, we are mostly not allowed to write about the sublime or about the soul or about eternity. It might go something like this: "Eternity—ha ha!"

You could write a poem about eternity and feminine hygiene, perhaps.

Looking back from three hundred years, we might say: it was important not to act large.

We are familiar with the pulverization into the smallest possible units of all known substances, from atoms to phonemes. But is it important to sometimes be large? Or, how do we "act small" and "be large?" Or, how can we be small in order not to consume the large? What is small? What is large?

There is historically in art the reach toward the durable, the long haul.

Here is an expression the Greeks use frequently: in former times. "In former times," says Manolis, and he might mean when he was five, or when the Greek polis was sporting its first philosophers. In former times, there were the tragedies and myths with which to identify and understand the largeness of our lives. First the myths explained gods and men and sometimes women. People chewed laurel leaves to get in on the transport. Ushering in the post-ritual era of art in the Mediterranean, some broke off from the festivities and watched from the bleachers. Thus began the play between the spectator and the spectated-upon. The spectacle, the spectacular. Heroes were high people who fell, and each person fell along with them. The myths and the tragedies tried to deal with what is and what is not perishable in the self.

Obviously the forms must be renewed, or things are no longer spectacular. Attempts to finger the marvelous can fail if there is nothing left behind the attempt. I'm sure Longinus probably said something like: don't consume the large in the effort. So much poetry pushes the point over the cliff and ends up with—a dead thing. Yet, as an experimental poet born in the 60's, I might not even attempt the spectacular. I might be afraid to. I might not get my toes anywhere near the cliff. As we approach the end of time as we know it (e.g. of the millenium and other things), can we only deal in the extinguishable?

Perhaps we have come to the reverse of some kind of cathartic expedient. Now that everyone has had their own taste of Warhol's fifteen minutes, who cares? We don't want to stand in the bleachers anymore. I want to be eternity, or see it look like me. If the hero is not quotidian, who can identify? Each reach toward the sublime (we can say that the sublime is eternal) must be thwarted with a minor stroke to make a palatable, an atomically acceptable, broadcastable eternity. Simultaneously, all atoms are by nature nonperishable and endlessly recycled. So that: it's true what they said when they said, we are the stuff of stars. And of everything else from that instant when the electromagnetic radiation hanging around in what was then nowhere suddenly conspired to explode fifteen thousand million years ago. Later, the atoms of a dying star's waste drifted down to earth, or elsewhere.

But I am confused. What is the eternal? What is the sublime? Are they nearly the same thing? The sublime is probably eternal (someone suggested that it is "a small scoop of immensity, like a brilliant packet of eternity")—it's what carries Sappho across. When the poem hits that moment is when it "knows everything"—a something that it is not pos-

sible to know in the rest of the poem or in the writer's life. It's O'Hara's making the intangible tangible or the tangible intangible. But the eternal is not necessarily sublime; it is probably often hideous and, by turns, hideously tedious. The sublime is solar bursts and all that. The eternal is that and also groaning repetition. The eternal hits all kinds of lows, I'm sure. The sublime, I think, is heights. How do we get there?

Clearly, no maps. Only, something has to occur in language, like in the nuclear furnace at the heart of a star. One must upset the atomic stability of language. This transgression of *o logos* means eccentricity; the most interesting poets describe the strangest arcs. Proust says a writer creates a language within language. Gilles Deleuze elaborates. A writer forces language "outside its necessary furrows to make it delirious." Delirium carries language off, "a witch's line that escapes the dominant system." It is a "bastard race that ceaselessly stirs beneath the dominations" of the given system, "resisting everything that crushes and imprisons." Tall order.

"There is no reason to signal any decade or era as deficient of vision. Words on a page are deficient of vision and this may occur in any epoch. We are particularly nervous about our own..." wrote the poet Barbara Guest. By "words on a page are deficient of vision," she means to point to the uselessness of a poem that is inert, that doesn't make the language transportable. Moving, or capable of moving, spontaneously, as migratory, motile cells. Deleuze: "There are no straight lines, neither in things nor in language. Syntax is the set of necessary detours that are created ... to reveal the life in things." The skin of the poem moves, moving our attention.<sup>1</sup>

To be eccentric, and to make language work (as an animal is pleasurable and flexible and ambulatory and perishable) like an animal, a protean one, uncovering new grammatical and syntactical powers. But what is eternal about an animal? Would the true sublime or the expression of the eternal be so shocking it would knock us over and out? Frank O'Hara gives some pretty swift blows. So should the language that tries to reach it in small or large ways slap us around at least occasionally. If I try to think of someone else who does this beautifully I can think of Alice Notley. I can think of Bernadette Mayer, too.

Does eccentricity become a limitation? It can. I am worried about this: I am detained on the skin of language. I get caught up in the thrill of the net, the sexy slidings around along the horizontal in/of words. Science has led us to a better understanding of surfaces—of language or a cube or a moon. We cannot therefore pretend that surfaces do not

exist. "Do I rejoice in surfaces?" asked Proust. Or do I rejoice in no surface? "A phrase plays / upon the conquering surface of things," writes Hejninian. The surface is the most ephemeral part of an object (we can say language is an object), like the surface of a lake is where precipitation occurs (If it were heaven-bound?). Like Duncan's "back of the language," I want to remind myself to think about depth or height. I don't mean this in any Christian sense of The Word. Although it is sometimes often very difficult for me to do so, it seems important to consider more than the what that the language can do. I want to remind myself and a few anonymous donors that a poem at its most powerful is an object between persons, not between a person and a theory. "When delirium falls [...] into the clinical state, words no longer open out onto anything, we no longer hear or see anything through them except a night whose history, colors, and songs have been lost."<sup>2</sup>

I want to say something here about the fact that I cannot abstract the notion of pleasure from the notion of poem (It is a little trouble I have, and not always fashionable). Pleasure and sublimity certainly bear a resemblance. Does eternity then? Does pain? This leads me to a little digression, an equation I have not yet worked out, around the possible sado-masochistic implications of eternity/perishability/sublimity/poetry/death/fear of eternity/fear of death; or: is an obsession with the perishable a more realistic approach to the human condition (dying)? I still don't understand how one adds it all up, or should something be subtracted? Nor do I understand what the eternal is nor how one arrives there, just as I don't understand exactly the notion that as we look at a star's light, we are looking at a hundred million years in the past.

The poem IS NOT an explanation of this place, but perhaps a confirmation that IT EXISTS. Its will-to-be is in contact with what cannot be expressed. If we were in a space (country, culture, time) where the non-cognitive aspects/needs of language were held primary, then I should question that. Now I am questioning this: "Thought about art demands that it be subjected to a scientific method or a social critique."

A poem, like eternals, is in part a suspension of legal terms. As soon as an attempt is made to apply laws to it, it becomes apparent—laws cannot account for this situation. Just as the scientists have yet to work out a system that accommodates force and matter, and are coming to a realization that Keats was all along right, so we need negative capabilities to house this thing. What is "this thing?" Eternity and the perishability of the human and human language; eternity and the impossibility of saying anything about it; the depths of language and the depths of the soul and how these two do and don't match up.



I would like to return, for a minute, to the Greeks. It seems to me that it is important to be aware of a wider poetic circle than the one encompassing one's own time, culture, and national affiliation. Otherwise, the thing gets proscribed. Sometimes I think my friends and I are too interested in American poetry, the colonial power of the uneternal (money is a good example of this). As Norman O. Brown points out, "each society has access only to its proper power; each society will only get the kind of power it knows how to ask for." How do we ask for another kind of power? Frank O'Hara asked the French and the Africans, but we forget to ask anyone besides Frank O'Hara. Or, take Emerson on it: a tree thrives when it is engrafted with a foreign stock. The Greeks (or the Nigerians) might or might not know much about expressing the awkward and the eccentric, but they might teach us something else.

"Poetry is the plow that turns up time so deep that the layers of time, the black soil, appear on top," said that great Russian, Osip Mandelstam. At the beginning of this millennium, in certain parts of the world, time began struggling toward a goal, and that goal was Christ. Time is not Christian, although our system of counting it is. The idea of art as a field in which progress is made is inherently conservative. Make it new. But out of the desintegrated decay of the old. As it decomposes the maternal language, the poem invents new utterances from those materials. These inventions are "not interruptions in the process, but breaks that form a part of it, like an eternity that can only be revealed" as it comes into being.<sup>3</sup> Until the next Big Bang, we can't make space from scratch, only from scraps. Not "deliberate demolition of form," not the "denial of the shape of appearances." Not "calculated suicide, for the sake of mere curiosity," nor "you can take it apart, or you can put it back together." "It might seem as though form were being tested, but in fact it's the spirit rotting" (Mandelstam). The point, I hope, is not to reveal that we can do strange things to syntax, but through syntax, to reveal the strange things "beyond all syntax;" language and the possibilities hiding in its intervals, between its certainties and uncertainties; language and the many forms of life thriving in it.

The word hovers around its object. It is hungry, it's a hungry ghost, seeking its beloved body. Mandelstam maintains that "revolution in art inevitably leads to Classicism." I'm not sure I agree entirely, nor do I believe that eternals are all harmonic and beautiful with rainbows attached. Perhaps they are not even entirely necessary. But will grammar alone renew the imaginative resources of the poem? Isn't there something back there or forward in time that's useful, something to dig

out? If poetry is a revelation of mysteries, have we come to the end of our mysteries? We are quite busy discovering new ones embedded in the acts of language. I like that. I like grammar. I like breaking it. But what else? A grammatically-bound imagination? Aren't there some pots and pans to bang around?

1 This is a paraphrase from Lyn Hejinian, from something she writes/says in her talk "The Quest for Knowledge in the Western Poem," given at Naropa in 1992, and published in *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac School*.

2 Deleuze, from his preface to *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Other quotes from Deleuze are from the essay therein, "Literature and Life."

3 Ibid.

*Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic, and Where Would I Find One?*

for my grandmothers:  
Donna Gene (Ewing) Manthey and  
Christina Katherina (Sanders) Schultz

I've spent years trying to reconcile being a poet with being working class. Yet, walking home from work one day it occurred to me, such a reconciliation is not only improbable, it is also undesirable. My language comes out of, indeed is exalted toward, the space created where these two identities refuse to meld inside of me. In that messy, dangerous space the possibilities of language are expanded.

What does a "working class poem" look like?

How does it sound?

How does it behave?

What if I'm "too intellectual," "too confident," "too experimental," "too fragmented?"

Growing up working class has given me skills, perspectives, and knowledge which are a part of every decision I make. Growing up working class taught me how to survive. Growing up working class is part of my very breathing.

How are "poetries of identity" created? How are they made normative?

When I say "working class poem," "working class writer," what do you hear?

Tillie Olson, Kevin Magee, Mike Amnan, Karen Brodine, Rebecca Harding Davis, Meridel Le Sueur, Agnes Smedley, Dorothy Allison, Mike Davis, Carolyn Kay Steedman, Barbara Smith.

And who? Who does not survive in our language?

*Anxiety is a sticky substance infused with fear. Dollar for dollar. Or, for instance, poverty. My own collusion in bourgeois appearances bleeding me dry. The need to be seen or recognized outweighing other emotional vaults.*

This is the most difficult essay I have ever not written, for as much time as I spend writing it, I spend more not writing it, carrying it around knotted and unruly.

\*\*\*

A discourse around class and poetics is lacking, if not invisible. While it is now possible to identify a trajectory of experimental women's writing, to inhabit a vocabulary of gender and sexuality, references to class often remain just that: mere codes. Several problematic issues arise both in the writing of, and writing about, what we might call "working class poetry."

First, the drive to create "poetries of identity" (a phrase I've been using for some time) tends to solidify normalizing tendencies in terms of form, style, and content, i.e., does a poem have to be narrative, "I"-based and "about" work in order to be considered "working class?" Furthermore, drawing a straight line between one's identity and one's poetics is problematic at best and confuses the biographical information about the poet with poetic works that genuinely seek to explore, unseat, complicate *subjectivity*.

The obvious point to be made is that identities are infinitely mediated and complex; coming from a particular class, race, gender is not—and should not be—the map through which one can trace a trajectory toward a particular type of poetic expression.

That said, I still consider Lorine Niedecker (along with being a great Modernist, experimental, American, woman writer) to be a great working class writer. It is part of providing myself with a history.

*Dear Hilda, Dear Wallace, Dear Michael, Dear Frederick  
Dear Marianne, Dear ball and stick, Dear K, Dear K, Dear K, Dear K*

*A language of provisional objects  
A language of hunger*

*The head of the hammer  
flying off and cracking*

*Or a spade unable to overturn  
the solid earth*

*Does the word "proletarian" refer?  
See now, a figure described as my grandmother crossing a room*

*Replace "I" with "salt in a bag"*

*In the face of my parents' illiteracy  
all the ravages*

My anxieties race through me at a difference pace, clutching at my lungs, my throat, making it difficult to swallow or breathe. My childhood anxiety wasn't made up of monsters in the closet, or fear of the dark. My anxiety was tied to something which my parents could only haltingly save me from, something which they toiled vigorously to save the entire family from: poverty.

The threat of falling into poverty, losing one's health, losing a job, looms over the working class and creates particular anxieties, mental health issues, and survival strategies. I learned to take care of myself early because it was required. During much of my childhood, my parents each worked two jobs, and I was often alone. Now in her fifties, my mother faces health problems which I can only attribute to years of overwork.

I took care of myself. I struggled. I got angry. Though the idea that I would go to college was with me from a young age, there was no such thing as a "college fund" to pay for it; my parents had no money to send me to college. If I were to go, I had to figure out the way myself. And I did. I became an incredible overachiever. I racked up academic awards, anxiety, and rage. I knew I must always do more, be better, to prove myself worthy. I took nothing for granted.

Education is like a religion for the working class. It's the "way out." Of course, at the present moment, that both is and isn't true. This news has reached even popular journals, such as *Spin*, which reports in its October, 1997 article on "Sucker Ph.D.'s":

More than one third of all new history Ph.D.'s will never find full-time teaching work, according to the American Historical Association's own newsletter, paltry numbers given the mammoth amount of time you have to invest to discover your fate. Across all fields, 40,000-plus students will receive their doctorates this year. Few have illusions about what awaits them: a handful of good jobs, each sought by hundreds of applicants; university presses less and less willing to publish the academic books needed to gain tenure; protracted separations from loved ones. Grad school, an option nearly every halfway idealistic college student contemplates, has become an invitation to purgatory (122).

This brings me to the inevitable discussion of MFA programs. Camille Roy, in a recent discussion on the Poetics ListServe interestingly points out that when she first came to the Bay Area, there were resources available in the community for writers to learn more about their craft, such as the free workshops offered by Bob Gluck through Small Press Traffic. Roy attributes the current institutionalization of such resources into university MFA programs, where people must pay for access, to

dwindling funding for the arts.

This is a very difficult situation, and while it is true that few poor and working class people will apply themselves to a graduate program, such as an MFA, which virtually guarantees that they will *not* find a job, some institutions such as San Francisco State University are historically very working class. Like other working class folks, I worked full-time while completing my MFA in poetry at State. It took me five years to complete the three-year program, and during that time I endured a level of exhaustion and stress which had adverse effects on my health. (I was almost hospitalized in the middle of it in 1993.)

In addition, it must be pointed out that not everyone enters such a program with equal amounts of privilege, and completing a degree, while providing for the acquisition of particular cultural capital, is not a great leveler. Working class people are often worse off when graduating because of the massive student loan debts they carry with them.

So why did I do it? Because my working class heritage has imbued me with a stubbornness which allows one small part of myself to refuse to accept that I am not allowed to have what other people have just because they come from wealthy families and I don't. I wanted to learn. I wanted an intellectual community. I wanted a writing community. Are MFA programs the best answer to all of that? Certainly not, but I did gain some of what I wanted in all three of those areas. And I existed at State, much more than I did as an undergraduate at Columbia University and Oberlin College, because I could look around and see my experience reflected, and not feel so much the horrible grating of isolation.

*the passage of place  
in desire  
a geometric development  
heretofore opposed to wake  
pronouncements and sedentary acts  
the startling possibility of collectivity  
when money has everything and nothing to do with it  
"I'm just trying to get us both on the same page"*

People assume they know who I am because I am white, because I am "educated," because I am reasonably articulate. But my efforts to be "good enough" have been too successful: they have helped to erase who I am. I pass so well, but you look through me, and what you do not see says so much.

My own writing comes out of those points of pressure and contradiction. The education which introduced me to Anne-Marie Albiach,

Gertrude Stein, Maurice Blanchot, post-structuralism, and experimental narrative, also ensures that I am a stranger to my own family. I now speak at least two languages. I cannot forget, or erase, one in favor of the other in the difficult act of writing. *Amphibious, we live in both worlds, but belong to neither.*

Writing which brings to bear the full force of one's psychic, material (body and word) power is not sweet or delicate. It is not "safe." To fully inhabit the world of working class subjectivity in a poem requires that I withstand an incredible emotional pressure. I scratch away at the codes or placeholders which seem to want to denote class, and try to find what lies underneath. *In the face of silence, only my stutter.*

While literacy is certainly an issue when discussing the "accessibility" of innovative works, I have sat with readers with high school educations and Ph.D.'s alike while they encountered similar challenges and delights in unlayering a poem. I refuse to assume or presume my audience—any audience—during my writing process. To assume that the "true" working class poem is only a narrative exposition of working class "experience," is to buy into normative reading patterns established by post-WWII academic poetics in the U.S. This assumption precludes the full possibilities of language, isolating working class poets to a particular kind of expressionism. It would be difficult to find a parallel prescription placed on the depiction of class in other art forms.

The difficulty in discussing class and poetics reflects the larger obfuscation of class within American culture. While Labor is becoming more visible as we near the end of the 20th century, and the intelligentsia faces a job market of dwindling opportunity and wealth is concentrated in the hands of an increasing few, the myth of a "classless" society persists. (Have you pulled yourself up by your own bootstraps lately?)

Too often, class is conflated with race in a fuzzy-headed analysis that fails to account for the conflicting privileges/oppressions of race and class. I continue to believe that it is extremely valuable for white working class people to speak out about their experiences and interrogate what it means to live simultaneously not only with racial privilege, but also under economic oppression. Exploring these kinds of contradictions is the only way that theory will catch up with praxis.

As someone both white and working class, I have often been painfully invisible, particularly in academic environments where it was much more comfortable for white academics to assume that I was "like them" despite evidence to the contrary. One woman at Oberlin repeatedly insisted to my face, "you're like me—your parents have money." The fact that I was not supported financially by my parents was a foreign concept to her, and far too many others. I had to insist on my own

existence, insist on the right to my own experience, and avoid being put in the position of taking care of their feelings of guilt.

*Writing is thievery, as in stealing time.* I will forever be envious of those who are afforded the material conditions and privilege in which to write. Those whose parents paid for them to go to college. Those who grew up blissfully unaware of financial struggle. Those whose families are able to provide them with a crucial safety net in times of crisis. These people have the things that I always wanted, but will never have. I can't go back and change that. I can only fight to harness my fear and rage in a way which returns me to the page in a productive way as a poet who believes that issues of power and privilege are of vital importance.





No me quieran por que no  
Soy Barbie





Sometimes: AVECES  
Sometimes I think maybe

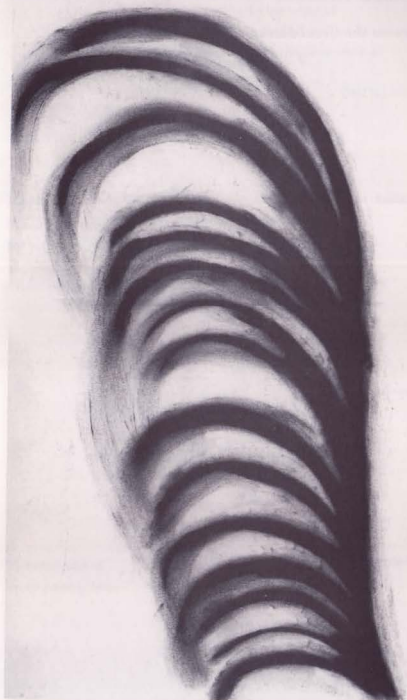




natigas  
 malgas  
 culo  
 gula  
 ass  
 butt  
 sack  
 What else,



Everyone Knows  
Gracias.



*Notes on the Great Strike of '97*

A move (at last)

a move  
meant

Defrocked

is happenstance

Incontrovertibility of the positions  
become plain

The usual grievance procedures  
long gone

Tens of thousands  
arraigned — is  
one way to put it

Beholden to ?

The burden of proof  
on us  
ok

In the wake of  
so many  
asynchronous stabs at

Regroupment

Hash out —  
lock in —  
the action-plan

(synchronous)

— Strike!

As for  
the abrogation  
of past settlements  
(that is, truces)

Pleasure-pain of  
every passing hour

Relish

Not flimsidarity  
(the socio-sexuality of the ruling class is flimsidarity)

As "in it  
for the long haul"

Preponderance of confidence  
building

(these emotions — de-skilled as they've been  
can attest?)

Retaliatory (to the core)  
unapologetically  
the front — broadens

"let's go — see  
how we figure  
into it"

A measurable cut *into*  
disaffectedness  
institutional  
disaffectedness

(that was "experimental," pups  
this might or might not be)

Henceforward —  
a sense of entitlement  
(as yet unofficial)

Carved out collectively

Collaterally rousing — others

"can I join in  
in it?"

who were  
(and this advisedly)  
"free" to

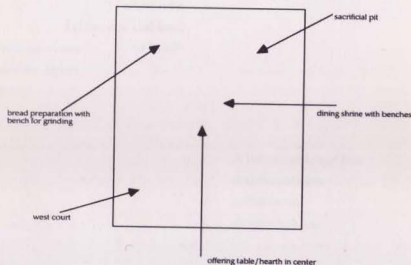
*dear history,*

I wanted to say there were some questions regarding the bifurcated mind. That the distinctions between the philosophical and the emotional are fabricated from an over emphasis on personal narrative as singular and more true or more real. Simple and complex ideas are carried along by passion and no one is stopping at the dedicated four way stop sign at the intersection of reason and intuition. It only seems as if they are stopping. What brings anyone to the idea that there is a difference between the personal and the philosophical. How does it begin

1. there are facts.

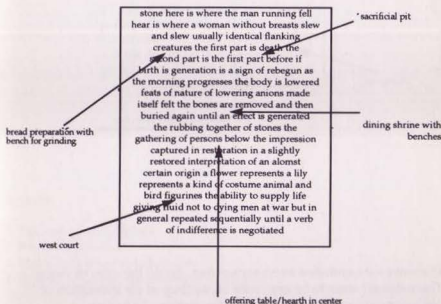
Except, there aren't really facts. Take for example history. The truth is plastic moldable and based so heavily on what we'd like to believe. Driven solely by passion. The words, the language are the keys to that passion. Because from the beginning we are making a past. An image is constructed. The woman took eight steps to the north. The man carried a bowl of barley. How have we come to say "history" then? Not just simply "whose history?" but "how history." What is the investment?

Fig 1



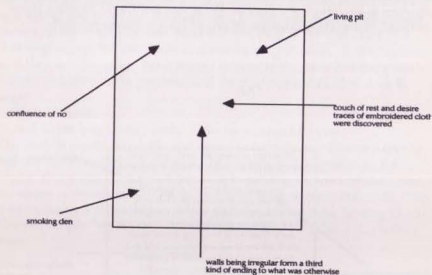
The field is not an ordinary. When we go to make we make from ourselves. Building our connection. Marking our story of loss and desire. What does it mean to say for example that a beginning of religion is a cult of the dead? Is the field of the spirit invested with loss? How can this not be of great personal concern? And further, suppose that the image of a deity changed from an impersonation by a priestess to a clay figurine in the image of a person. What was lost there? Is this a lapse of faith? Is this the acquisition of power for a common person?

Fig 2



Who is doing the making and how do we translate the image for ourselves? On the one hand we want to say that there is a fundamental impulse to express spirit and on the other this impulse of spirit is also and expression of power. When separated one can be said to diminish the other. What interests me mostly is where these two intersect. The idea of spirit is a personal one, the idea of power is a political one. These things intermingle in the poem.

Fig. 3



The rules for translation evolve unspoken. So do the rules of vision. There doesn't seem to be any more immediacy in the translation of one's personal narrative than on the translation of a history.

## Appendix a

what was found in the bathtub:

9 bronze double axes  
A bull's head rhyton  
Jugs decorated in floral style  
2 small pairs of horns of consecration  
other equipment

so it was not a bathtub but a shrine:

2 cream oils perfumed, (unguent jars)  
perfumed liquid soaps varying in size  
plastic net  
4 cloths decorated in paisley style  
pumice stones

## footnotes

1. Take away and replace
2. Repeat if necessary
3. Make up a story to tell anyone
4. Be both pleasing and powerful to the lips

sections of this piece are excerpted from "Offering Table with Hearth in Center."



## A Poetics

It seems a little ironic to be attempting a "poetics essay" from inside a seemingly intractable writer's block. At the same time, absence and gap may be the best jumping off point for consideration.

I cannot seem to get away from Pound's assertion that "points define a periphery." The idea has endless allure for me. Firstly, Pound's statement upholds a reassuring faith that there *is* some kind of coherence, that there is an outline, a fence that can corral in all the mismatched ideas and relations of experience. I love the modernist optimism of that.

At the same time, I have reservations about that very optimism and a sense of resentment, of feeling hemmed in by any possible periphery. Ergo, the flip side implied in Pound's statement (and certainly worked out in his practice): gaps. Ellipticism and incompletion are evocative and liberating, or can be. They are also an unavoidable fact of life, and it is thus convenient, almost obligatory, to embrace loss, absence, interruption as apertures to other possibility, as a means of shouldering despair or oppression while also disgorging them. This, too, is an optimistic stance, but I prefer the ambiguity it permits, the paradox. And additionally, I do not mean that loss or gap is to be resolved in a facile way. Still, the seams of holes and rupture might be sewn together so as to bring the most patently contradictory images, sounds, and ideas into generative contact. Empty spaces functioning as beginnings.

Because, importantly, I am a woman, I must cite what that means in my poetics. Here I will refer to an essay, "Castration or Decapitation," by Helene Cixous which has been helpful to me (1990, pp. 345-356). Cixous looks to the ways women have been made silent and envisions an *other* mode of writing, one which embraces difference, which eschews easy delineation in favor of "that cheeky risk taking women can get into when they set out into the unknown to look for themselves" (p. 354).

Where I find Cixous' approach particularly useful is in her own reflection on void, absence, and loss. For a feminine text, as she has it, is without closure—no ending, and no origin, just beginnings: it "starts on all sides at once" (ibid.). One thinks of the work of Susan Howe (to raise up only a single example) which, even visually, begins and leaves off on all sides simultaneously.

In such work, the refusal of tidy origins and endings shoves writer and reader alike into the void. It is an undertaking which

requires, perhaps surprisingly, enormous *commitment*, given how little can be known or even desired of outcomes. Speaking from my own embodied experience of the moment, I say it is analogous to pregnancy. I give myself up to nearly a year of sometimes alarming augmentation/diminution of my body, only to end with the painful emergence of a human being whom I do not know and yet with whom it has been pre-ordained that I will be in an intimate and enduring relationship.

Perhaps my poetics can be summarized as one which equates beginning with loss and vice versa. All of which is bound up in a deeply held sense of commitment to that process of loss-start. Or an adherence at least, which understands my participation in the process as one of faithfulness.

I would be, then, if in a stumbling way, like Cixous' woman who:

"does not resign herself to loss. She basically *takes up the challenge of loss* in order to go on living . . . This makes her writing a body that overflows, disgorges, vomiting as opposed to masculine incorporation . . . [This process provides] the capacity of passing above it all by means of a form of oblivion which is not the oblivion of burial or interment but the oblivion of acceptance . . . she does not withhold . . . she is neither outside nor in" (pp. 355-356).

Or I turn again to another woman and writer whose work has been my companion, Simone Weil. Like Weil, I understand attentiveness as crucial, a mode of commitment, if you will. In that case, the fact that I seem so little capable of writing a satisfactory poem of late is secondary. What is important is that I attend closely to my silence, inarticulateness. That attentive waiting is not merely receptive, it is, as Weil says, a form of love, "a miracle" (1977, p. 51). It is transformative: a means of faithfulness which, happily, turns the hoped for thing upon its head.

With Weil, I share a commitment to a Christian faith. But I must attend to what that means and, correspondingly, what poetry that might make possible. What, exactly, in faith are we attending to? What is the new Eden? Poetry insists that we cannot forese our desires or proscribe our satisfactions. And so, poetry's salvific power for me is its halting, contradictory response and its intermittent silences.

## References:

1. Cixous, Helene. "Castration or Decapitation" in *Out There*, edited by Russell Ferguson et al., New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/ MIT Press, 1990, pp. 345-356.
2. Weil, Simone. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" in *Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George Panichas, Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977, pp. 44-52.

*Interview for an Ambient Stylistics**Do you watch a lot of television?*

I bought a TV the other day from one of those discount stores. I lugged it home one hot day last August, plugged it in and put it under my dining room table. When I am lonely I turn on the TV and flip through the channels. It makes me think I am going to walk into the room and say something to someone who is there, like what's for dinner or did you hear about the person who put a quarter in someone else's parking meter and was arrested for it, or it makes me want to talk about my family sitting around the TV in the seventies listening to Chet Huntley talk about the Vietnam War when my mother says it is time to get up and eat dinner and we get up and eat our rice with red chopsticks out of bowls (one of them green) my father made and sometimes we never say anything at dinner. These things never happen of course when one is alone but they remain tangential and impossible compared to things I was doing (having tea, taking the trash out), a kind of background music of "splendid conversation" (Emerson said that about Carlyle once) and everyday things going on in one's head. After the news I eat a cookie made in Canada. I have a cup of English Breakfast tea. I write a poem about a box and in one of those boxes I put a TV in for my father. I tie up the trash in a plastic grocery bag and leave it on the street. I go out to Riverside Park at 72nd St. and find a place under some trees that is shielded from the streetlamps and Judy and I exchange looks at Hale-Bopp through fieldglasses my mother gave me one Christmas. Two or three things are happening to me now as I write this and it is impossible for me not to think of those images and those binoculars and my mother's face and Judy's hair that is blonde even at night. This is what the ideal building should be like, incidental and functional and very relaxed. The building must always carry with it the sound of some non-identified voice. In this way talking back to a poem (a poem is not a dialogue) (that is what happens when one writes it) (what image am I giving off at this moment?) ought to resemble something like yoga, or yoga right after having shiatsu, a kind of nervousness of being in knots with other persons followed by relaxation and comfort with oneself.

There is something primitive about language and this is what most people forget, and in the midst of being alone in a big city it is what one craves most (talking) and here in the various brainwaves endlessly

going one finds the blueprint for all language and talking. And one is most aware of this when one is not talking, when the blueprint is visible in all those imagined conversations that one is having in one's head and not really spoken. A perfect poet (after all poets are supposed to be the unacknowledged masters of talking in our world today and their neglect and poverty is testament to our own hidden world of conversation) anyway, a perfect poet—and all poets are—would do nothing every day except use as many words as she or he could to count things: the green and white awning across the street with the number 310 printed on it, or the street sign in red and white mounted on a green pole that says: NO STANDING 2pm-10pm. And in point of fact, the poet has already been there affixing words to things like spirit signs and spirit busses and spirit license plates. This is the center of civilization and it is visible from my apartment on 72nd St. I live in the center of this world but the mapping via signage is so local and miniaturized that mastery seems to be disappearing. I am endlessly disappointed or depressed by who I am because this is always a reflection of what I see. It was this that had initially led me to undertake the project of documentary, to escape, but now it is hopeless. When I look again, I realize there are too many signs like this and there is no way to make these landmarks for *homo urbanus*. I now know that a photograph cannot create language, it cannot. I knew even then that a photograph could not document language in the past. It is to this past that I now return. The language is inadequate. It is to this nothing that I now devote myself and I do nothing else but this.

There is an amazing amount of conversational possibility (call it luck) in things that are almost not said to someone else, and the best poetry is really not what was said but what was almost said without thinking or feeling. It seems everyday conversation resolves precisely around ephemeral things as that. Call it gossip of the mind, or an inter-ambient kind of talking that never actually takes place. Such talking has the same effect for me—especially when I hear it in the cathode ray tubes and the invisible gasses of color, and the hum and drone of voices on TV—as being in a diurnal meadow, or being in the various transistors hot and cold inside a plastic radio I got at the local junk shop on 125th St. The meadow that is television is a rainbow unglued. The colors seem to go on and off at will, like a form of leisure or the sound of automobiles when one is sleeping in the back seat. Nothing is heightened beyond itself. In these instances, the TV is more soothing than an ocean, which is too dramatic to inspire a conversation. Conversation need not aspire to the condition of music for there it would just confront a vision of its own emptiness. Conversation is freer, more empty and more concrete than music. It has lulls, eddies, breakneck speeds,

and of course it can be used to get someone into bed and to caress that person until they sigh and to make things up completely.

*How does that relate to a poem?*

All poems must be long. They involve giving up a movement forwards, and that usually leads us to say something kinetic and beautiful. The long poem plays with its own endlessness, as a duration that manages to actually be a kind of narration. The longer a poem gets the more formless it becomes, and all long poems aspire to the formless. A truly great short poem would suggest an infinite length. The beauty of something is the act of being something else. But all of this I think gets coupled with, for me again, something more concrete, which is closely linked to this idea of form but is not the form itself. In February of this year I was looking for a mode of expressiveness or at any rate being more expressive. I have no idea of why I thought the long form was capable of that.

Perhaps the vestiges of personality hang most closely around those things we think we had given up. The notion of plenitude in sameness. And there was also an attempt to decompress the outside into the inside, to give up that pressure (constant) that builds up with writing. In

Poetry should not be as easy as breathing it should be easier. Poetry should not be ironic it should be completely sincere. Everything that reverses in a poem, like sex or ethnicity, is potentially liberating for those waiting in the wings. In America, where nothing that is American can remain American forever, one must tune in all background noise, all freeway sounds, all rush hour music, all TV chatter, all meaningless language, all forgotten operations in the middle of the night. The voice of a male or female calls, and one rises, and the sunset sleeps alone in the bed all night long. The raves and the lewd and the world.

This sense the aim was to aim for writing as a form of relaxation. It would be nice if it could breathe. It would be nice if the box I am writing could contain the ins and outs of breathing, as if breath itself could be made redundant. A finished poem is never very beautiful (it is as Picasso said ugly). It does not have a style (it has not enough time to do that) but a poem being written and changing as it goes along is a very different thing. From television we learn that 90% of things advertised no longer exist after two years. A commercial can never be used it can only be used up. Also the stream of commercials is not linear, it is merely electronic. There is a very great complexity to this because it is unrelated to what we are trying to think of right now as I write this. The street signs, the course of the day, the doorman holding a door across the street for a young girl with a yellow looking dog, the bottle of Margaux 1989 my friends served me last night at their suburban home, the arrival of daylight savings time last night at 2 am as I took the train back into the city, the people out walking their dogs this morning—they

are not what we are thinking. Of course there is no essence here, only surface.

A great poem strives to remain forever on the surface in this hyper-real and heighten ambient state. In this there is a kind of relaxation. All great poetry is deeply relaxing on the systole-diastole level and on the level of the brainwaves. But these things are always felt in a surface sort of way. That is why people are hardly ever aware of them or themselves. The poem is what is always not happening, not being said, etc.

*How is beauty related to poems and buildings?*

Poems ought to be endlessly permeable, capable of fitting in everywhere they happen to be—not just the seminar room or a book review or Barnes and Noble—decentralized and ethereal, transparent, in the air, hidden from sight, non-programmed, deeply repetitive, and they should be divorced from posing a question or supplying an answer. They favor all known upsets of the real and the material. Beauty is its own trademark for displacement, something not quite there. The words are not essentially about what they are recording, be it love or rain against the aluminum siding. If I say, but not to you, if I say it in a poem and this is the great thing about a poem because it is not at all like common everyday speech, "The oranges fall to the floor," it is as if the end of literalness had been attached to this singular expression, as if one inhabited a theater of missing emotions, which now resemble what are typically but erroneously deemed "specific styles." Revelation is achieved in the dilution of styles, the escape from omniscience, the act of transferring out of the literal. This might lead the work away from mere primitive self-expressiveness into something as yet undetermined or else rigidly pre-determined by chance. The style of "its author" must always be unwilling to exist in the work. That might be deemed beauty, though it certainly wouldn't last. Poetry is thus extremely functional, though in reality it touches nothing—it does not pretend to any greater materialism or realism, it is not the things we see and touch or hear. It does not have a structure like a rock. It does not pretend to break through to formal or stylistic innovation, as an antidote to some former or outdated structure, for it acknowledges from the outset no visible or presiding structure of feelings, no concept of poetry as bracket.

*How often do you read poetry?*

Whenever I feel like it. Poetry is good if it aspires to relaxation and deconditioning of the human body, and forgetting about the other



structured work and play processes we hardly think about but live with everyday unthinkingly. There is always another level to this unthinking. There has been a large and difficult movement in modern poetry that basically sought to make the reader uncomfortable and to challenge the reader, or else it sought to remind the reader that one was listening to someone else talking, and that this someone else had a distinctive voice and a distinctive something-to-say. I believe the time has passed for individual voices and statements, and difficulty, especially difficulty compounded out of technical innovation. Both innovation and voice and clichés and they make it hard to read poetry, I mean read poetry as opposed to make poetry. To make poetry is easy but to read it is hard and that is why we have so many poets today and so few readers.

*But don't you have to have an ego to write poetry? I mean from a practical standpoint it would simply not exist unless someone, an individual, took up the making of a poem, which would lead to something like ... ?*

The source of the poem is not the maker and the genius behind the poem but the experience of the reader and what the reader does above all is become someone who listens. Now if poetry could inspire that state of just listening that would be poetry. And if the listener could inspire that state of just listening that would be poetry too but it would be better because there would be no effort to make, there would only be that state of

*It should now be obvious that for language to be truly relaxing it must usher from the things around us and not the things inside us. Language like noise must be liberated from the pornographies of the self. The result is religion or at least pseudo-mysticism. The body that is touching you. The body in yoga. In a country that is constantly becoming more and more foreign to itself and its own ways, the American tradition fails to exist and excite attention in the poet's ear, for the ground of writing exclusively in the present moment is an affliction only repetition can counter.*

listening. And if the maker could only listen, there would be no need for making at all and there would only be listening then. And of course, because this touches on being human, I think poetry should make the reader feel good; it should put the reader into a state of renewed receptivity, it should make the reader forget location and voice and style and what time it is, and where everyone around him or her is "exactly," should make the sense feel as if they were working together. In this way, poetry would become more and more natural, and less and less second-hand. A regular poem that was written is completely used up and useless and cannot tell us anything about being natural. This is why I prefer poems in anthologies to poems in individual books. A poem in an anthology has forgotten its author. It receives coaching from things next to it that probably don't like it or can't understand it. I was watching a TV show the other night on MTV and they had some-

one who knew a special kind of shiatsu and he was practicing it live on Kennedy, the emcee for MTV's Alternative Nation show. And his English wasn't very good but he was explaining to Kennedy how I touch you and you touch me and everybody is touching everybody and no one can tell who is touching who if it's you or me and even though he wasn't saying it well he was saying being touched isn't about touching someone else or being touched by someone else it is just about being touched and about two people experiencing the same thing at the same time and whether he was saying it at all. And Kennedy who can be very funny wasn't being funny or sarcastic she was embarrassed because she didn't want to make fun of some Asian guy who didn't speak English very well and because she doesn't like being touched by a stranger on TV and because it was sort of a joke but it was also a kind of enlightenment about touching and talking and who wants to be enlightened while watching MTV. The best poetry wouldn't even know that it was poetry as it was being listened to.

*This all sounds very sloppy but could be re-interpreted as—?*

Yes, but it is necessary to re-think what it means to have the necessary discipline. As John Cage remarked, "true discipline is not learned in order to give it up, but rather in order to give oneself up. It means give yourself up, everything, and do what it is you are going to do."

*What do you have to say?*

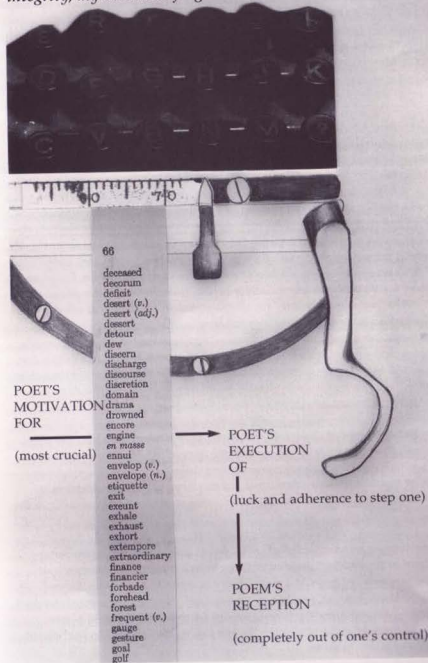
Style, especially in America, is a kind of death, successfully bringing about what Stevens and later Ashbery—who understood his own suffocation in language more than any other 20th century poet—called the end of imagination. Yet strangely, there persists to this day the quest for style as baroque self-portraiture, identity, advertisement, rebellion, political complaint, liberation from "what came before." Nothing could be more distressing to see as a driving force behind poetry, than the cliché of received human emotions and the gaining of selfhood is one. To write without or beyond a single or singular style entails the loss of personality but it enhances the feeling. And it is principally as regards feeling that the styleless writer realizes the goal to be both inside and outside of the writing mechanism, once known as the self, at any given moment, and in this way style is used as the most efficient link to the memories that culture generates.

Could you say something about time and the time it takes to write a poem?

The minute an emotion like a poem becomes memorized (the worst form of recognition) it ceases to exist in any meaningful or human way. In place of emotion, one wants a mood. One wants to listen simply and soothingly, without really caring for what it was that one was hearing. Anything in language that slurs or slides is potentially enervating enough to redeem itself in this manner, and thus becomes something that one can really listen to. Anything that drags slowly in the groove is potentially good in a meaningless sort of wavelength. Anything that was said to be forgotten is ultra-ambient. Forgetting a word is among the most beautiful things that can happen to the human brain. The dumb poem is the most beautiful poem. If nothing is forgotten no attempts at recovery will be made and hardly anything will be spoken. Forgetting is the best reason to keep talking. For example, I was reading Diana Trilling's account of her visit to the White House for a Nobel Prize dinner with the Kennedys, in 1962 I think, the famous dinner where JFK said that this was the largest collection of creative individuals ever assembled in the White House except when Thomas Jefferson dined there alone. Diana Trilling, who seems like a rather vain and spoiled child in the piece, talks at theatrical length about the preparations of buying a dress, then another and another without having to spend a lot of a poor intellectual's money, and the dress she first buys is too short and the wrong color—and one is not at all surprised by this. That and the Kennedy quote are about all I remember about the piece, and perhaps a detail about the men in military jackets who coach you and tell you what to do and the way JFK sits down very quickly and without regal pretensions. And how he exuded power. None of this matters no. Diana Trilling has died. So has Jackie. One can hardly imagine that dinner and JFK's speech, but one does. These are the ways one has of feeling. If the world is white, then color is a form of redundancy. Trilling's piece gives up. There are a few redundant colors but most of them are gone. A great poem makes one forget all the colors except one.

YEDDA MORRISON

*integrity, my bold new fragrance*



HELENA—I do not enjoy the spectacle of men ascending.

STORM—What are you trying to say?

HELENA—I'm saying it.

STORM—You are—intolerant.

HELENA—No—occupied—

—Djuna Barnes, "To The Dogs"

to be "fairest of them all" is a problem of self-identity. the solution is of course, murder. or years upon years of tedious work. it is not the material world itself but our moment's poetic interpretation which establishes the poem's rules for acceptance which are specific and vary from camp to camp. for we (and by "we" throughout i mean those who would call themselves experimental writers) know that the object and the image of the object invite various translations and differ quite completely. and we know that without the continued ascension of poets, all existing poems might reside contentedly together, extending, complicating and complementing each other until the end of time. or, the planet would thrive without us. which is to say, though we may guffaw at traditionalist notions of beauty (read grace, valor, wisdom), in attempting to be radical or experimental we too have established specific aesthetics and while we would not call it beauty, our equivalent aspiration exists, divides and limits. which is not to say that poets should not strive, far from, but to say, too often we write towards the poem's reception when attention to our motivation should be all encompassing. the "feminine" can be approached accordingly. as can any plan of political action.

or, predictably even the poet's recognition of discord has become complacent. surface experiments are easily copied and copied well (hey—let's get a makeover). as if version were difference. but if urgency is lacking there is no longer evidence of inquiry. we are neutralized by our lack of risk. how about a new ad campaign, *don't hate me because i'm ugly*.

in her "Feminist Manifesto" of 1914, Mina Loy states, "women must destroy in themselves the desire to be loved." as must the poem or more precisely, as must the poet. there is more critical work to be done on the planet than cultivating the art of acceptance. stab a stepford poet and she'll repeat him-self. she does not recognize the habits of her "mind," consequently she belongs. but belongs to what? so i set about to kill my inner hostess.

because beauty, (substitute current trope) or one's perception of something as beautiful, relies on its own threat, it ascribes an action. it is scarce so it is sought. the economy of "agreed upon" to a poem motivates. the poem moves through and under and in this it is both endangered and dangerous—the ultimate in sex appeal. the poem must negotiate the frozen pinning of the historical page, as it resists the human need for recognition. or, i take pride in the unmarketability of my mind until the rent is due. there exists on the part of the poet the desire to preserve and preservation, because it denies the collapse of that which it is preserving, contains no inherent vitality.

the struggle between snow-white (that aryan angel) and her stepmother is explicitly sexual, as in, who will most appeal in the race for father's favor. when you have light and shade you have volume. volume is the weight of the worldly object. or the materials of consciousness. there is no fabrication. we deal in volumes. or the history of all time is the evolution of volume and this evolution is called form. the volume of a woman varies in terms of what she allows not of others but of herself. allowance necessarily defies convention (thus engendering movement) or, this is my weight and distance, move over—I'm (a) broad. or, personal allowance translates directly to the impact potential of the event that is the poem.

the stepmother has *duende*—she'll do anything at any age, including the murder of conventional beauty (if only to replace it with her own). snow-white's sleep is ageless. in this vacuum seal of agelessness there exists no threat to her young white hetero beauty, therefore her appeal must be in the utter accessibility of the body in death. do we enter the unknown to seek solely that which is recognizable? in this the poem short-circuits. if we fully recognized the limits of our time on the planet it would be incapacitating or incendiary. this human being who could live only once. she was commissioned. it is in the critique of the commissioned that enduring (as opposed to preserving) art occurs.

so exists the material of the poisoned, red apple below/above the skirt and she rises to answer the door. commerce and competition beg without—(disguised as need of course, but the system of late capitalism is in need only of fodder) the without which is also the poem. the poem and its threshold establish a continuum between what is known and what is desired. the story of innocence is a male fantasy, it implies a "snow white" interior into which he may enter. but she knew what she was doing—she also knew she had no alternative. the call of the poem is the call to risk. it is the invention of options.





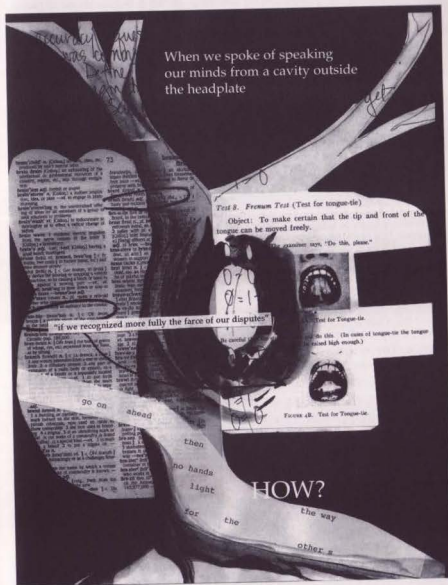
shows me, it has *duende*. i have assumptions about my face, about my value as forged by the economic and gender realities of my existence. and about the translation of this image as a commodity less sought after than i might have hoped if i'd thought to hope for anything. or, what she should "allow" is a much larger question than issues of style or camp.

the poem is nebulous. and yet the materials of which it is an image-object intersect it. thus the nebulous narrativity of the poem allows for a remix that might in turn, for example, allow for a radical refiguring of the defining principles of clique aesthetics—thus who she might have been, thus revolution. each object has its image life-span and while snow-white may not age, we will forget her. a poet, in contract with the poem, is subject to a constant negotiation of insight and ego. thus the poet participates in her own production and decomposition, however limited the tools.

inherited, agreed-upon "beauty" is frozen in its own preciousness and the understandable relief of acceptance. it harbors no movement thus countering the poem's essential drive towards fluidity and function. because by definition beauty is that which is threatened, when it is frozen, agreed upon, it forfeits its essence. or worms, or our agreed upon interpretation of worms, are imperative to the evolution of poetry, the existence of beauty and the decomposition of stepmothers and girly-girls alike. they create the possibility of beauty (by threat and opposition) while eating through it. they are fluid, obsessively decompositional, fertilizing, or, they establish the architecture of loss, these dual motions—without (as far as i know) the worry of acceptance.

the real queen of poetry is that it generates. so as to be of and against the conundrum of its historical occasion. in this it is not practical, it is possible—barely. in poetry's liminal fabric, we turn the mirror first upon our composite selves (say, *i was commissioned*), and in doing so, upon the world. only our questions change, and consequently, their formal translation in the material world. for one's accuracy is in questions only. the poem and by extension, its poets, generate a multiplicity of efforts *toward*—, if allowed.

when we write, we see the street we live upon, provided there's a window. the rest can be a daydream. send this page anywhere and it will arrive at the cite of the crisis. the future will be shoulder to shoulder or crib death. risk is perhaps the only resource we are not exploiting.





dear yedda,

every time i try to write to you the ugly little cartoon man who looks like a paper clip interrupts me and asks can i help you.

this is a real letter but also a fake one. i'm walking on that edge so i guess you are too.

so why, why a letter. something about that razor edge of fiction. i've been reading eileen myles and in a swoon because to me she shows: fiction is: this is what i see, this is how i say. and maybe how i say is to embroider or maybe i perceive myself as sticking absolutely, it really doesn't matter. somehow the merge of see and say and the urge to connect.

relationality. and the job is to note, to measure, in each case, the space between, its texture or timbre. i'd like that space to feel really charged though the fact is often it feels flat or something to fall through. and so that too, that flatness or fear, is something more and more i'm interested in.

when i thought about why i feel compelled to use this form—and i want to say a letter is in some way a stand-in for an idea, an idea of form, so i'm interested in the letterness of life and of form, not necessarily in actual letters though of course those are so sweet too—what i came to understand is that it's, yes, about connectivity and collaboration and conversation, the same words i've been strumming on for the last few years. but it's more—a letter provides a frame, a focus, amidst the vastness of possibility, while also pointing to its own arbitrary nature. it's like a "you are here" in a big map. look at all the places you aren't.

people conduct their vacations in so many different ways. some like to get lost and some like to read. some like the fiction of preparation like a game. in a story i read last night in *the chelsea girls*, eileen and her friend both made lists of furniture from the sears catalogue. they were both equally serious about their lists but then the friend actually bought the \$59 headboard and at that moment i realized eileen was destined to become a fiction writer.

a wandering possible, but because it says dear and love there's a kind of

built-in boundary.

i'm constantly trying to understand how to walk the line between commitment and the institution. between a slow kiss and date rape. i mean between tag and being arrested. or between planning to buy the headboard and actually laying out the 59 bucks. or between laying out the 59 bucks and thinking that that really means something. or between letting it really mean something but if someone steals it (no one would steal a headboard!) then enjoy the deliciousness of loss. that's what i want. and now i'm getting so greedy i want to find even a way of finding deadness, downtime, delicious. is that like making peace with death? or maybe with a mistaken idea of death. making peace with all the mistaken ideas. yes. yes to error.

dear error. dear pain. painted. dear pane.

"a life is out the window and you are pulled through it/all you worry about diminishes you/at every moment a body is being violated/ although the mahogany window frame was designed for safety/when you chose this method of seeing/you are crowded with anyone"

from a fraser poem. she has h.d. and bryer hurtling south on a train. the breaks are probably all wrong because it was on a tape. "at every moment a body is being violated" is a feminist statistic but the move here is to include the speaker in the ethic of care. it's a move that turns love into line.

the more you let in.

the necessity and the danger. "william carlos williams had watched stunned once when she was caught up, enraptured, in a thunderstorm and on another occasion when she waded out into pounding surf until it beat her senseless."

care is epic. scope. is a love letter. dear yedda—is writing this. we travel and we return. we look through both ends of the scope. as a child do you know the difference. you go up to anything and touch it. gradually you learn what burns. what fences. solution could remain something liquid. something adequate. duncan: the risk of the wrong words must charge through.

out of order. error equals imagination because. logic: imagination's wrong. incendiary therefore. we travel and we don't come back. what then. come with. i thought i had a job to do. a kind of assignment.

air mail. provisional. did you pack enough air. i'm getting better with takeoffs. oh it's bumpy. the bumps mean you are here.

tender. what do you have to offer. will you write back. how will you sign yourself. a poet had 23 identities. end of story. see you tonight. it's north american like creeley or anybody. something recognizable. in paris i could sniff the cowboy boots, the twang, a mile off, the splayed body language. a kind of confidence. built on violence. there's no end. where do you take your vacations. do you cry in private. do you pray on the holy days. a litany. a borrowed form. the daily broken.

these interiors need attention. it doesn't look like something i've seen. a growing hunger. water and heat. mall or stall. recognizable truck. she said mini is no size. you choose. take me with you. dear yedda, love sarah. that particular. call it. of one letter. a kind of chunk or rhythm. deleterious or delirium. take it out. order it. winsome. limerick. an extra catalog. i'll see you in the reading. signed. i might be a little late. ration. to what end. no man has shown up with a bucket of paint. why we have a body. sing. singer. singed.

\*\*\*

topic: of a place. argument, reason. discourse...

not-chicago. fingers 37 wrinkle bumper  
sticker we are light stuck  
in the material

struck. bones blasted  
hectic music

a hung picture, the stench of manure corner  
5th ave and central park east

accept the fact you have no shade

so the gossip  
column reported  
her sleep pat-  
terns

book. this book holds a secret  
frayed threads caressed by strangers

and she said "mystic," "play" and "i  
read these poems on my break"  
"refrigerator hum"

the hum muscle

my book is a secret  
an ellipsis

cooler darker feel of fall

radiator

time lost and given  
relation

sequin

*Poetics Statement I & II*

You are inside a building and then outside it.  
—Barrett Watten

I

Recent poetry definitely believes in identity (the solitary personality) which is hard to get used to, a sort of preoccupation with the self where how far do you push it always seems to be the question (but always with an assumption that there is a bedrock of identity—the assumption that you can use words, like the ground you walk on, to document yourself, that there are safety nets to permit your investigations—which is the inevitable problem and joy of these psychological investigations). Linguistic means of expression are useless for expressing the drive to self-preservation, to posit a crude world of stability, of things—where the world of sleep is the most durable, drafts that are constantly increasing or losing (a subsistence economy) is what writing is good at and should pursue. But this is perhaps too comfortable for its own good—so much writing seems uncomfortable in this sense and should be pursued accordingly, so that it arouses a kind of astonishment and need—unfortunately, often nothing new in this sense. The reconciliation of fragmented titles and structure take on a rhetorical life, which whether intended or not have something in them—a diary, a thought, stages of romance—while sleep seems to be the only thing that really digs in (Proust).

Expand difference. Great opening line. But not as many of these lines work as I'd like. Two currents that don't particularly resound are the "I do this," "I do that" lines and abstraction of other lines about disaster, millennium and authority. Also, then, Bible imagery and mother, father, whatever death strikes—the text just doesn't seem to warrant or need all this weight. You can pick apart the "I do this," "I do that" trope with lines that point out the tautology of it all. Remember Joe Cheravello's "Oak oak, like like" and expand on it. Watch out for angst and clichés. Use error as inspiration and the things you find most embarrassing, but be careful to see that it is fulfilled in the rest of the work. Whether or not to schematize becomes an issue of whether or not the text should be a show for the eye. External circumstances take refuge in the beauty of form and its entropy, content always too derivative. Two languages, one as geological skein over which the other tells

anecdotes of local action. The separation is too clean—words dilute and brutalize, words depersonalize.

How about a perfected syntax that suits the material, but that lacks an economy. One always feels that it gets hold of something, riffs on it a bit and then lets it go just at just the right moment to pique the reader's interest and allow the writing to go on. But what does this amount to? This can go on indefinitely, and what about the fugue-text, writing as sorting—more convenient than anything else. Lack of economy makes it difficult for difference to work. Reference to a perpetually displaced signified, that seem like objects placed in the road to be removed. Effectivity with which the text seems to be satisfied, chugging along through its landscape as poetical structure, as a struggle between languages and mechanistic interpretation that desires nothing but quantities, effects, describing processes. Instead of only exaggerating the influence of external circumstances, what of an unrestricted economy of writing, unrestricted but nonetheless an economy which implies an arrangement of elements in a system and also an organization of resources. Poets must be makers or builders AND *oikonomos* or household managers.

The body as personal rather than political structure is hackneyed and unknowable. The sagacity of self, activity associated with pleasure deferred as experiences of necessity, give and take, with a certain comprehension as the result constantly constrained to transfer the value of life back to the front, risks becoming a repeated movement in the text that accumulates (rather than circulates), through references to suicide and a body/map of violence, constrained to make a place for oneself in the text-process—so the purpose of the writing becomes overly-important, a pale image sketched in consciousness; self-realization regarding narrative as spatiality of the body and a desire for cause and effect. The individual feeling isolated in the text as a process toward distant goals, the measure of failure and fatality grow as with a resistance that can expend itself only on what resists it. Reminiscent of despotism, it seeks to forget or subvert what is known in order to assimilate language into sensualism to make the work look as similar to life as possible with the elimination of choosing and judgment. Contemplation as the only road to truth is the type of health that breeds a knowledge that knows but has never seen, again, the unknowable self emerges and eclipses the body.

The evidence of the body in writing is nourishment. No obstacles or burdens appear that are usually associated with pleasure. Movement as the urge to communicate pleasure and displeasure, however sluggish,

even better of at the pace of a broken clock (what is a broken clock?). Language as a sign that what matters most is beginning to be defective, to have no place in a mechanistically conceived world, only displacement, only what doesn't characterize, only what has force. One should follow one's self-consciousness as guarantee of the movement, detachment and deferring of language as a property of time and space—the absence of desire for self-preservation and self-will. The arising “hunger” is an interpretation based on far more complicated organisms (the political body), a desire to incorporate everything in the unrestricted economy. Not replacing what's lost but seeking other roads. Procreation is the consequence of a hunger. The energy or force doesn't come from cause and effect or communication, but from defective language. A protoplasm divides in two when its power is no longer adequate to control what it has appropriated, an ordering process that looks like purposiveness being perpetually blocked by outer forces—government governing to form an image of an inner world and enact a leveling process of language to pure description in the name of the body as an anti-aesthetic—functions of the body versus consciousness, *yet once in, we never seem to get outside of this consciousness*. Perhaps Barthes' “Degree Zero” of writing has been achieved but to what end? The text becomes a sponge, a governing body (no longer political in that it is restricted) that renders any idea of economy superfluous. Problems of the text that would normally be solved aren't solved and are thus annoying and unknowable. The body becomes more important than language—the body as abject, monster text, 18th Century materialism, Michael Jackson. Inner circumstances that cannot adapt to outer circumstances. Government versus economy.

## II

Often, without knowing it, you read a poem and you find yourself in an already constructed network of comprehension, the shadow in which labor, life and language conceal their truth. Less often, in full realization, you read a poem and find yourself somewhere completely different, where the shadow is of each letter in the poem, language exposed, a sentence in giant block letters across the top of a building. Communication model as neon sign blinking on and off like whatever the sun cuts in half with its light or signification without the sun (or “Sun cuts throat”—Appolinaire).

Writing into smooth plateaus that are not accessible to any reading of resemblance or evolution. Nor is reading a matter of sorting through semantic categories or methods that would provide some basis for the activity as one of arbitrarily choosing structural signifying routes. In

the tradition of hermetic works—some books of Coolidge and Nottley come to mind as well as the work of Laura Riding and Barrett Watten—poetry questions not literature itself, as it appears and works in the text, but what makes language possible as a force for the systematically reduced mind. The poet's *real politick* is not feeling or representing your pain, but rather *seeing* it in language and defamiliarizing it as much as possible. It is not poetry in search of a utopian socialist movement, but it is an expulsion from the imaginary into the “*cogito*” of the dreamer (Bachelard). “Dreams are our life, which we will never be able to penetrate. There can be no separation from an invisible world” (Watten).

Poetry is never axiomatic, but rather, “constant, altered only by our design.” (Watten). The popularity of prose forms among today's poets bears a axiomatic quality, sentences read and sometimes progress like axioms in a mathematic or logical sense. To perceive while being-in-the-world is to *struggle* in the most political sense to the point of high organization at times. In other words, the poet should *organize* language in a political fashion, though not nearly as adroitly as it may sound. This writing settles on you like so many days, like so many streets that you've walked a thousand times. Poetry performs inside and outside the subject constantly, but still maintains the distinction because imagination does not exist. Imagination disappears with the first line of each poem into a historical framework that must configure in and out of history or be lost only to be shored or stified. This unimagination is not a lack of imagination; it is not even imagination of the lack, but rather that which is hidden by imagination and what is given alike: the neutral, the unmanifest.



*from Record 1.0*

1.2 (transmissions)

what's exciting is when you/me/we get to a point where we either realize that we have created sense or that sense is impossible or at least temporarily absent.

this sense is just of a different "order" than we are accustomed to. what about sense as sensory?

perception. making sense as tracking (maybe hunting) perception which is not so rare but really we are overly surrounded by it so we are registering or recording a version of perception—that act as an act of making and maybe sense making—very fabricated.

but not "forced" by logic (usual)—i would like to say there are versions of perception or models of it layered like an onion (w/ no "core") all are valid—operate differently.

we do go through/sort through w/ different strategies—systems—assumptions about what is, at the very least, pleasurable or attractive, has energy—why pick one apple over another?

all of them have a goal of undermining and evoking different "orders" of perception/thought.

undercovering detection. making sense or meaning—driven by different forces than the usual syllogism of narrative (temporal) factors.

what forces then? explosive, accidental, combinational, juxtapositional loud & crashing—must be more—dynamite/dynamic/energetic.

all of the above may be things that undermine the usual logic (accident especially) overloading senses undermining the "outer" mind.

outer mind proposes a depth model to which sense & meaning give shape—or contour—maybe even body as in flesh and blood where do we exist in this—as agents—as translators as records as inky.

i think the "we" exists in this in all levels—one is no "truer" than

another. why go thru this process at all?

why not? something having to do w/intensity—back to the excitement of discovering the possibility and impossibility of meaning—i am a sap—but that intensity—moves me can make me cry.

yes, a poetics of discovery.

the playing field where we have set out to encourage this that which is bigger than the both of us is uneven by nature this field of possibilities where this that ranges offers a community where we with this that can belong to something bigger than the both of us.

i don't know about the personification of that-which-is-bigger. part of me doesn't want to try to define it because i feel at ease with this issue of trusting in the impulse and trusting in being led rather than trying to lead (so much a part of my own poetics anyway) and because i don't really think it's necessary to define "it" because what really matters is the writing. whatever it is that makes us "swerve" away from the ordinary patterns in thought (!?) and logic, what's important is the results.

*"he truth we know is not of what is, but of what is happening."*—duncan

this quote seemed to me to get at a similar thing; i guess that we are attending what is happening rather than describing a thing.

*(transmissions interrupted)*

number twenty eight

what is inevitably thought

incapacitation precise resistance  
of the object dissolved space outside

at bay but retrievable by an attached  
grasping an invented habit  
riddled

some things must be italicized for example

enormity

the depth of what eludes  
a familiar dilemma or negative

in spite of yet precisely it is not its not

or in a way nudity a mathematical  
dressing up of the spider  
more a predator than what we thought

number fifty five

as a consequence of perpetual

departure fugitive prisoner

excitation embalmed nailed to

a forgotten expression quoting finery

as one who waits

it is to say enclosed historically

she waits he sails the hum of the wheels

a thin container

it follows is declared inverted

a stunning convenience below ground

the future delinquently obeys

a custom of the unfaithful

below and above

the remnants a sign a breath mingled

melts unglued from delirium

there are two words sustaining

provoking oscillations an entrance

## number ninety three

polarize the border lines  
walk out of  
dual restlessness  
torn between  
perpetual collection  
straddle inner version  
opposing frames  
both on ourselves in  
counter-stance  
reduced to a view  
and horizontally swift  
an angular  
fulcrum collision  
severed pieces  
break down the flesh  
uprooting  
bring to breath  
fluttering through  
what she hears

## 1.1 (notes)

Record exists in a 7"x11" aqua and black, gold trimmed, 160 paged lined and numbered record-keeping book that you might find at a dry cleaning store. Over the last year we have sporadically but regularly written in this ledger using a variety of procedures, constantly manipulating the variables of our collaborative project. We not only experiment with modes of operation but also vary the locations where we meet—all of this to increase the possibility for the unexpected. In searching for systems which are porous enough to include many different kinds of textual and musical artifacts, our interest lies more in the process than the product. We use traditional surrealist operations—exquisite corpse, negative inversion, "automatic" writing—and we often improvise on them to create new ones. The pieces included use these traditional operations but also use ones such as the following procedure. One person writes in irregular patterns down the page while being read to and simultaneously listening to music. When finished, the second writer follows the sculpted surface of the page and fills in the blank spots created by the first person while reading and listening. Typically, we would then repeat this process, changing positions, changing the order of who goes first. Sometimes, we simply write "automatically" for a designated number of lines and then exchange the book, passing it back and forth and writing quickly to avoid thinking too much.

Through these many different procedures, we try to create an environment for ourselves which compels us to negotiate an excess of sounds and information in an attempt to dislocate and disorient our habitual modes of apprehension and writing. Because we force ourselves to explore and encounter unexpected logics, we frequently surprise ourselves and always get a great deal of enjoyment out of this record keeping. Through this constant engagement with play, we have found that the project was able to incorporate a broad range of mutual interests—NBA basketball, vampire movies, all kinds of music, motorcycles, poetics, current events, politics, semiotics and much more—which work their way, directly and obliquely, into Record.

*Opiates of the Muses*

*poets starve so near the stars  
because they like to think of bars  
of pure bright gold near them in heaven...  
And things we hardly understand.  
like mystic numbers three and seven—  
And all the things we know are dead  
in a dead land.*

—John Rodker

*"very protesty"*

—Bob Dylan, on  
"Rainy Day Women"

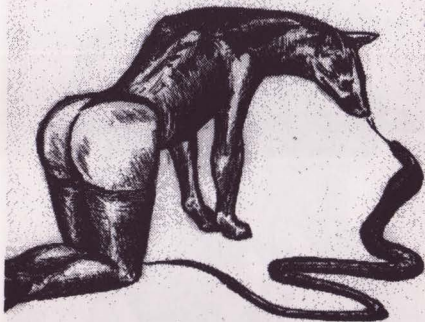
prepared spiritual poetry arsenic-in-signet  
prepared astrophysic mushy pea for luncheon gimlet  
go ahead administer this thin tinned aspic highness science  
emil q. late capitalist maws agape  
refugees from liberal educated sixties-missers  
ne- high to a -wage earner betcha  
half a ashram's trash collection contract  
the blooded red forget  
<<recover hard>> hard  
at least the golden dawn had  
mr. thistledick  
so we eat  
police horses is that  
so<sup>o</sup>o<sup>o</sup> sp-p-pooky since the drugs  
had nothin run-of-the done in  
this is a quiz  
these immolation kits just get easier  
while I stage a zauberflotte full of  
full on suburban celan envy  
glove compartment worship worship  
life is a glue trap so start gnawing  
you are all a be-bop-ba-reep  
closing in on the zen sincerity tester  
take my language, please

like experimental is a huge eugenic bumper sticker humor  
handed you by liddy dole  
when classlessnessist active ingredient dispels the doubt about  
a sprinkle in your sweet and low?  
tracks of mac-10's  
for officer when  
why, these quote marks look like little sickles!  
my o meat hook gnostichism  
who gives a fuck where the heavenly tree grows  
(a bumble bee?) got to love the bulb pop  
pulling us up by our ruts  
minus james earl ray's new trial  
of fires *this* time and  
microdimato bullet spirals fractal, dude, while i conspire  
in the news today a lactating cat nursed firehouse schnauzers  
go wish you had some ashen flash cards with that  
or lead pencil to remember  
or fecal matter burgers with mythology and fly-low dough  
funny, you can't not watusi  
it's first light by the just-post-bonobo mastodon jump  
the figures of the present dance  
a lemur, a measurer  
everybody move the mouse, yeah, yeah  
everybody move the mouse  
otalgia of alchemy laden  
players cut plug  
i'll take cancer of beneath the tongue  
over dullard solemn song cycle q through q through q  
someone get coltrane back on smack  
like there's been forced splenectomies  
and in band à part (i've commented)  
if you teach a man to fish  
you can't sell him the latest  
hook line and sinker upgrades  
anyway i write for myself and strangeness  
round out periodic  
chart 'n chuck it  
insulate yourself from this'll  
prick a bit lidded tupperware tub of  
leftover leftover yesterday's irradiated naked pain  
the salvation army workers went on strike today  
okay, clam the gooe vampiric rhetoric  
may telemarketers call collect  
during tantric scrabble spelt



large here like the black market school  
tatamount like poetry is a waste of waste of space  
i found the blueprints to a zoo  
may the meaningmobile  
go and *oyez*  
pedestrians to death  
and churchgoers give a djin  
and a dust of gleeclub negritude and  
no is what i'm wishin to be owning

MICHELLE ROLLMAN



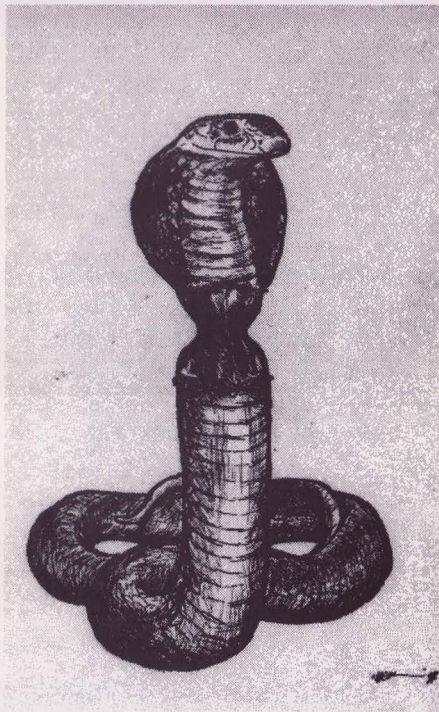
Rollman '79



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



1. Common Genet & Snake
2. Mouse Kissing Bird's Boot
3. Manatees with Small Fish
4. Black-Necked Spitting Cobra

*These Are Not My Theories (& People in It)*

1.

*stumbled prayer*

a portion of Mary, say please  
proportionate Mary, say please

2. Sharecrop

I sprung partly from Irish and Cherokee sharecroppers standing toes scraping along the porches of their tiny homes, and people who could not or did not read. (Also from people who did variously read, play tennis, practice accounting, and whose name was given to an English stream and a fishing 'fly.') The way the information was and was not passed down makes me keen on the cycles of how even the simplest, plainest facts (habits/culture) are politicized, erased and effaced and resurrected in times. Politicized: made trendy. So investigating that in many different arenas is part of the motion (desire/need) of my writing is all.

Also re structures: saw this guy on '60 Minutes' once saying how the Lakota couldn't—and actually Should Not—expect their sacred Black Hills returned back to them because .... and his logic relied on a very specific and tunnelled and dictatorial vision of time.

3. Keys to the City

But still I'd like to think I could be Danielle Steele if I chose to. (She's a little bit like Chaucer.) That may just be the fake fantasia of a low-income lady.

4. Not Theories (I put on taupe eyeshadow)

Paul was typing out the last rehash of a song we wrote the lyrics to together. Or I put in two cents. Quickly a heavy cloud poured down tremendously as I spoke over phone lines to Sarah and still said, *let's meet*.

So in City Lights I chose many books neglecting my plan of *library only till next paycheck*. I chose: Janine Pommy Vega's new book chronicling trips to sacred sites of (female) ritual, *Twenty Prose Poems* by Charles Baudelaire, a Routledge book on modernist women, and also a slim edition of *Asphodel, That Greeny ...* by W.C. Williams—this last partially to quote this bit:

"I speak in figures,  
well enough, the dresses  
you wear are figures also,  
we could not meet  
otherwise."

and play with it in (my) continuing *Eve Doe*.

When Sarah arrived she reminded me I said I wasn't going to spend, so I relinquished them all and instead stole from a table display: the little gold foil on a volume of Robert Pinsky which read in its oval:

POET LAUREATE  
of the United States

I stuck it on my black-sweatered chest and wore it to the Kathleen Fraser reading at Canessa Park. First though we sat with hot chocolate discussing art/entertainment and then walking, as Sarah saw Kevin Killian in what she thought was a skirt, she said "the job of a writer versus the art of a writer." And I said, "and money? and what people expose themselves to..." Or I said some such and it's all very confusing and kind of exciting (or: I am excited and confused). In any case, there is variation in what I want to and do *write*. At least it seems to me.

Sum of this: the economics of writing is tied to the mystery of it.

5. Guardian

I am interested in figures and ritual: this is the reason for the pull in me both toward various volumes of *The Lives of the Saints* and toward fashion magazines from all over the world. In my volatile/serious early twenties I used to really announce wanting to *be famous*, and when asked, why? came up with this: I want to be heard, I want a place for my voice and ideas.

There is a way in which my voice sounds cute, and then serious, and this confuses me also: I investigate it by allowing it. Process: scraps of paper with notes on them pulled from jeans and the bottoms of bags, or what might be described as a single idea sustained in the slow revolving door of writing a novel. *Eve Doe* is a place for placement and really thinking about *women*. It is a kind of archaeology. It is a series of experiments.

Figures and ritual: eagerly reading Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe* for its collapsing intersection of versions of each author/figure's lives.

Finding a new or divergent way toward interiority in fiction:

event, on event, on event and each character's thoughts and simple action at plain and poignant moments as events. Eclipsing events. Official invitations to events. Dragging out events. Flashback and forward events. Slapdash and cut-out events. Mirrors of ideas/issues/persona/lity. Remnant of event. How his therapist saw it. "This is silent history"—note to myself amongst notes for new novel. Trying not having interiority in the expected way that remains almost unread: Sheila brings the plant out to show him, she is thinking this and saying that. Tears form and fall, there is a cresting of emotion or thought. Though this still, of course, sometimes works—it's a bit cheap. Because of the narration of commercials and the naming of colors in J. Crew catalogs. I am very influenced by Gertrude Stein's methods of characterizing.

# 6. Repository of hand-held lace or any garment

"Maybe you could answer this. what is eve doe? what is it in response to? and how does she exist in language?"—Sarah Anne Cox

*Eve Doe* responds to the Big Books half-read and blindly infiltrat(ed)(ing). And any book. Newspapers, newsreels and sidewalks. Eve is broad. My methods of research are questionable, are questions put to texts ranging from (insert *That Girl in Your Mirror: Miss America 1965 Talks Sense to Every Girl* by Vonda Kay Van Dyke, insert *Bodies of Work: Essays* by Kathy Acker, insert insert insert—*Whores in History* by Nickie Roberts—insert the Bible and insert etcetera). *Eve Doe* includes footnotes and unaccounted fors. She exists in the placement (disarrangement) of myth and line. She is the lineager, liner notes. (There goes typo, a la Kathleen F.) She exists in fragments of diagnoses. She exists in theory and its rebuttal. She exists and exists and refuses not to exist. Eve is impregnable. So there your Johnny Apple. Yet: *repository* also. She relies on solitude. She is solicitous. She's very friendly and bossy, Eve. See how she is anonymous, Doe. She is put upon and putting. She is kind of like a sculpture into the Big Books. Like: *Paradise Lost*, if I may be so bold. And any book (or even, comment). Any woman seen. She is an actor. As in, active.

Any woman seen.

## *Eve Doe:*

### *third movement*

servant & flunky      the region of uniformity

Eve Doe (recently) (in our time) (how she discerned murder mysteries here

Bride's instructions:

region of the butterfly pump. Bride's garment  
at the vanishing point of perspective

mortice  
joint  
stem

wasp

the beginning of argyle

if she ever finishes her quillwork

the universe will end in that      instant

the awakening of yellow      charcoal

briquet

and a drink to      microscopic  
couches & couches which Elvis installed      it was long there  
with Caitlin      looking at his living room

inside degrees      nationalities      bouquet & coquetry

tennis lawns      eclipses      sitting with fish and chips  
the old people      bowled      the young people      bowled      on



videotape  
 geniality and even Janice fortunated  
 knotted inside how the weather was made to  
 halloween  
 (the flattened plane at the beginning  
 of a century) "it is hard to say why she has been ignored"  
 alley body film noir)  
 in silver footage:  
 lying on her grave now is how  
 lying on her bed used to be  
 I look up  
 the state of being indented

some phrases taken from Paula Gunn Allen and Marcel Duchamp

First printed in *Eve Doe(becoming an epic poem)* by Elizabeth Treadwell, Double Lucy Books, 1997.

## Generosity as Method: Excerpts from a conversation with Myung Mi Kim

Myung Mi Kim is an Associate Professor in the Creative Writing Department at San Francisco State University. Her books of poetry are *Under Flag* (Kelsey Street 1991), *The Bounty* (Chax Press 1996), and *DURA* (forthcoming from Sun & Moon), and she has published widely in a variety of journals and anthologies. The following discussion took place in San Francisco in December of 1997.

**Yedda Morrison:** You mentioned in a recent lecture that "real change" cannot happen in opposition. I'm very curious as to what you mean by this. The popular notion of social/political/personal transformation seems to be that the friction and tension that opposition creates is fundamentally generative and change cannot occur without it. Do you have a model for social change which is not based in opposition?

**Myung Mi Kim:** Even in the very way we talk about how change happens, we begin by bifurcating: does change happen this way or that way—even in our desire to participate in a radicalizing process we do not address the complexity of it; immediately we come to this either-or proposition. I'm interested in augmenting or complicating a model of change.

If we acknowledge that radicalization doesn't resemble any one thing, then what would be the possible modulations and conversations around what oppositional looks like? How would it be possible to deliberate on the oppositional in a way that does not re-enact and replicate those very dynamics that are being "opposed?" To be vigilant, even hypervigilant to that tendency to replicate power structures, to recognize that we're each implicated in a machinery that works to maintain the loci of power. Under these laws, change itself is absorbed and collapsed. It becomes more and more necessary, then, to pose how we might participate in inventing how "change" takes place.

**Y:** What you're saying makes me think about Raymond Williams' notion of oppositional vs. alternative stances. The whole idea of cultural inclusion and exclusion—what becomes appropriated by dominant culture, what becomes in a sense co-opted by the system and therefore deflated in terms of efficacy.

**M:** Yes; so even "change" is fodder for the machinery that determines the status of limits and perimeters. Opposition may not play out its course before it is preempted and folded into something else. Apply

this notion to poetics: can you effect change if the culture in which you're writing can't even begin to recognize that your "unrecognizability" is a necessary part of inventing change. Can you follow through, with some measure of conviction, that by providing an example of your particular rendering, the potential of writing is renewed. Any time authenticating work is taken on, the poem becomes saturated with possibility.

We are indoctrinated into making choices about our work when we don't allow this to happen. There could be legions of us saying, I don't want to be unrecognizable, I don't want to be relegated immediately to this region of unrecognizability which seems to equal no potential for "social efficacy," to use Lyn Hejinian's phrase. Who wants that mantle of nontranslatability between their work and the world? I'd put a lot of pressure on looking at that equals sign—

Y: That brings up a lot of questions about audience, the insular nature of the poetry community, "preaching to the converted," etc., which are valid concerns. We don't want to fall into some sort of social realist model of writing in order to ensure translatability, we want to be true to our creative impulses, yet we want to be as broad reaching as we can, don't we? Nor can we make assumptions about audience because that's probably the most limiting thing one could do, make assumptions about someone else's ability to understand. Maybe it's enough that "authenticating" work exists, but translatability aside, who reads it? I think this ties in with the line of yours from *Under Flag*, "the widest angle of vision before vision fails to mean." How broad can something be, how much can a form hold before the form is compromised, how inclusive can a poem, a movement, a poetics be before its "aim" is completely diffused?

M: There is always some kind of invisible, constant, millisecond-by-millisecond negotiation between form and its divestment, between the poem and the world, that you engage every time you write. A poem having cultural translation in our historical moment, what would that look like? I was in a bookstore doing Christmas shopping for my son, and I was noticing the way in which books are cast, sold and bought. That someone would buy *Best American Short Stories 1997* and *Best American Essays 1997*, but *not Best American Poetry 1997*—when they're all sitting there right next to each other—you begin to understand on some real visceral level this question of where/how poetry meets the world.

If my experience in the bookstore is a demonstration of the invisibility of poetry, it seems imperative to ask, what is the poet's task? One task might be undertaking the kind of devotion and conviction

towards authenticating the work you must do, the work we each must undertake, and that forms the basis for a much larger vision for a mobilizing potential for poetry. If in this way we each meet our own liberatory potential, this must make a difference. Because finally, it will no longer be a case of writer X or Y or Z in isolation, but that if enough of us take on the task of personal liberation, the task itself becomes meaning-making or meaningful. As a community of writers and readers and poets and thinkers, we're anxious about our isolation, but perhaps this timidity and tenuousness can be converted into an investigation of what it means to find a connection between poetry and the world. Moreover, how might we work out different models of where poetry can exist, where poetry can be inserted, can be read, experienced; how can poetry have context. We talk about community as if we knew what that meant, but really, we have such a limited idea. Poetry is simply how you participate in language, and we all do that. We go to the grocery store and say hello to the clerk, and we've *done something* with language. We can actually make an intervention by proposing that poetry be experienced in the world, in the masses, culturally, even given the culture that we do have—by sharpening what we mean by how we do our work.

Y: So if we could just wave a magic wand and realize all this—poets pursuing their own liberatory potential through authenticating work and in turn, creating more venues around the city for reading and sharing their work—what would be your hope? What do you see this generating?

M: I think it would take a lot of the pressure off the demand that poetry be this efficacious thing. Because the social terms are so brittle, we poets put a lot of pressure on poetry to *do* something or *be* something, or *enact* something. I think the more that poetry can become part of a larger structure that supports it, the more it will take some of the edginess off of these decisions we think we have to make—like, what is poetry for, or who's going to read it anyway. We'll have evidence that it exists and it's real, and applicable to life, not *not* applicable, which I think is how we often experience it.

Y: One certainly sees this kind of pressure you're speaking of inherent within, and exacerbated by, the publishing world. There's so little going on in some ways, so few opportunities, that it creates this intense pressure, and consequently engenders this very closed way of dealing with each other and with the way that poetry intersects with community. You've talked about this, a group of women poets for instance, submitting a collaborative project to a book contest, that kind

of practical subversion of the agreed upon procedure, which in terms of the publishing world is largely unheard of I would guess...

M: That's partially my allegory of going into the bookstore. Making poems so easily gets jettisoned into authorship, or the commercial potential of authorship—and I don't mean commercial as financial necessarily—but even in the way that we think of legitimization—and that there's only such a poorly and singularly defined idea of the meaning of publishing—that somehow publishing equals legitimization equals a certain kind of authorship or privileging of the single author. My proposition isn't to counteract or demolish this notion of privilege, but to have multiple notions of recognition so that publishing isn't the only way you have a sense of work being greeted by the world. What other kind of constructs could support the idea of honoring someone's work? How else can we say, "your work is important, we want to read your work, we want to be in conversation with your work?" How many multiple locations can we make that support our creativity and hunger for meaning?

Y: This seems to necessitate a certain kind of generosity, because it's an acceptance based on "I appreciate your work," not an acceptance based on the model of competition and external legitimization, i.e., commercial potential as you say. If we're all scrambling for a few spots, how can generosity exist?

M: In that case, generosity can't exist. For me, where I can say *politicize*, I have to say the word *generosity*. Implicit in being political is trying to restore the human face, with attention to the implications of one's actions as a whole. So to be politicized, with that human face on, with the ability to read subtleties and nuances as to how you affect the systems around you, whether they are intimate relationships or work or the poetics you explore, how can we attend to that whole *circuitry*. The work is so perplexing that it is never a direct translation. There's always the mistranslation, or the thing that didn't connect, or the people you forgot to say thank you to. How can we keep making wider the terms by which we politicize or radicalize? I think generosity is a possible mode by which we can tend to the demands of listening and, ultimately, of change.

Y: I was thinking as you were speaking, that in this time of sensory overload and rampant consumerism, we're really trained out of listening or looking attentively and that this is part of the practice of poetry—to reinvigorate in ourselves the ability to listen beyond assumption, to retrain ourselves to listen to multiplicities and nuances—which

seems political in and of itself.

M: Yes, absolutely. If I can begin to occupy that space of tending and attending, of attention and of tracking subtleties, and to project out of that space with a kind of perseverance, a perseverance in the service of complexity, then this way of working has to alter the way that I take in the world and the others around me. In this sense, there's no separation between the kind of poetics one might try to reside in and the way that process acts on you.

Of course, this can feel all too slow. How long can one sit and be attentive when the world is blowing up? These are questions to be answered as they come up; there can be no *a priori* answer because then it would in effect be a summation rather than an answer. Those uncertain and undecidable spaces of—am I making a difference?—will this contribute?—how can I know?—those undecidable locations are part of the work. It doesn't feel great, it's not an exhilarated state, or at least not for very extended periods of time, but it is a lived state, and a true one.

But certainly these things are hard to reconcile because you feel with this kind of bearing in on your poetics that it has to, is bound to, translate into some kind of politics or activist stance in the world. You can know that, but it can still subjectively feel like you're doing nothing and that kind of disjunction or mismatch is hard.

I was thinking too that sometimes it's easier to accommodate that restlessness inside a poem than it is to live it. In a poem you can teach yourself to have a much more fluid idea of action and energy and how they have to be part of each other for anything to change. But in "real life," whatever that is, I'm much more impatient. I don't think it's a matter of reconciling it, but of being aware.

Y: So you think then that the practice of poetry over the course of a lifetime will train one to apply what is worked out in a poem to the lived life? That there's that kind of transference?

M: I certainly hope so! The writing process, however slowly, does convert to real action in real time.

Y: I'm interested in your relationship to narrative. It's been such a debated issue for some time now in terms of History as metanarrative, "postmodern" deconstruction as practiced by the language poets, etc. You said once that Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge attended one of your readings and said, "Oh, you do tell stories." You certainly include histories, erased histories, in your work; how does narrative factor into this?



**M:** None of us would be brought to language, none of us would desire to write, unless there was a deep urgency to say, and this deep urgency to say, is to tell, and to tell is to narrate. Now, whether that looks like a narrative or not is something else entirely, but the question is: how can you get the closest proximity to how you *must* tell something. There are more and more variegated ways of telling. There is a narrative, there is an urgency to speak, but the means by which we narrate are very different and must be different. Part of the meaning of being a historical subject is to engage in *how* to tell. What are the narrative conventions and strategies that you have an intrinsic relationship to? How to refigure and reinvent and reoccupy the manner of telling.

**Y:** *Under Flag* is such a "story," an epic narrative, a telling. Perhaps that comes through for me because I've been trained to read in this way; but what about someone without the privilege of such an education—how does a text, a narrative of this type, begin to translate if one doesn't have the skills to read in this way?

**M:** It's so disturbing that when the surface of the poem behaves in a way that signals no single, clear, traceable narrative strategy, the text becomes alarming. It immediately becomes an issue of "what are we being told?" or "I don't understand." Meanwhile, if the reader would pose instead: "what is there to be understood?" then there would be no impediment to receiving the story, because the story is larger than the issue of not understanding the strategies by which the story is being told. The story is there, it has an enduring quality, a permanence and scale, a specific weight of history and experience which will communicate itself.

**Y:** Do you think this is in part due to the relationship we're trained to have with printed material? We've been taught to read as an almost passive activity, for a very narrow kind of meaning, while also desiring a cohesive story, which is then further compounded by the authority that anything in print tends to claim. Perhaps the reader doesn't necessarily want to *participate* in the ways your work, for instance, demands. This type of reading takes a kind of openness, for lack of a better word, and it involves work—the reader must participate in the creation of meaning, which isn't usually what we want or expect when we settle down to read a book.

**M:** Yes, there's a tendency to read for epiphany, that "aha" of recognition. This demand on the poem is not suspicious in and of itself—we want to see ourselves reflected, we want our experiences articulated—to have the relief and pleasure of seeing ourselves

named—that is a gift between reader and writer. My worry is that given the literary histories and commercial histories we've inherited, the place where that epiphany can happen, where connection and recognition can happen, has become utterly reduced.

How would it be possible to read meaning if you put a human face on every text regardless of what school, what poetics, what kind of aesthetic ideals it had? If you listen for the encounter, how could you not know what made that book? You could say, "it's not made of meanings that I would make," or "it's not constituted of meanings I already understand," but beyond that you do understand it because writing is that act of encounter and communication.

**Y:** Also, if we're reading to find something of ourselves in the text, I might pick up one of your books and say, "oh, this is the experience of a Korean-American woman, there's little here for me—yeah, we're both women, but..." But when texts are process or experience-based like yours seem to be, there is a distilling down of the personal to reveal what's potentially universal in even the most specific of events. Do you think that this is true?

**M:** Absolutely, and that fits beautifully with this idea of the human face. "I recognize you" can be one of the enduring meanings of literature. The particulars may differ; the reader may not be a one-point-five Korean American immigrant woman, but if there's something in the way I've been able to render my experience, that releases in that reader a way of speaking to her experience, then it doesn't matter that I'm Korean American and she's Chicana or whatever. It's the locating of one's own condition by agency of a text that is so profound.

The moment of encounter between how the text makes itself and how the reader receives those actions marks a translatability that becomes part of the narrative if you will—the meaning of being able to read seems especially important in our moment with its inattentiveness. To look at examples of texts that have come out of the near impossibility of speaking, texts that in a sense allow for the impossibility of speaking. To me this seems so unbearable and exquisite—

**Y:** Like Mallarme's "A Tomb For Anatole," which is really notations for a text he was never able to write...

**M:** And Paul Celan, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. With these writers we are in the company of language that has been met with potential erasure; what happens in that kind of collaboration between the impossibility of utterance and finding the means by which to utter? That space is never a decided, resolved, fixed point, and part of the exquisite

ness is its constant motion, and constant reshaping of itself. I suppose any poem is always on the cusp of coming into legibility—formally, psychically, politically. For me those works that keep re-invigorating that space of silence and erasure, the space of the seemingly untranslatable, are the ones in which you connect to a source of endurance and power.

Y: That's interesting in terms of what you were saying earlier about translatability and effectiveness vis-a-vis the practical application of poetry and the incongruity of that. These writers, Celan, Cha, et al, have posited their "untranslatability" onto the page, and however many years later people in your classes are reading these texts and recognizing something in their own historical moment. Perhaps you might talk a bit about teaching, and if that feels like a way for you to ease some of the anxiety we were talking about earlier in terms of poetry's political efficacy.

M: On the one hand, by teaching, I have intimate and intensive conversations with practicing writers which is absolutely renewing. Conversations around pushing into your art as a means of being a citizen, with awareness, with political conviction and insight, place me in proximity to potential.

But I am also aware that I am part of an institution that perpetuates certain kinds of models and not others. Part of how I have to make sense of it is by saying—in producing and maintaining certain kinds of conversations in my courses, I am making an intervention. My teaching strives to address the very institutional character under which I have to play these things out. So that's problematic and a certain formula for exhaustion, not only for people who teach, but for anybody associated with an institution. Academia is a machine built around depletion; everyone gets tired very quickly. It is hard to take on the work of maintaining this intensive dialogue of poetics and translating poetics to the world, from inside the institution, but all the more reason why I feel I do and will take it on. This struggle, this contradiction, becomes part of the radicalizing potential which you and I have been talking about. The way that you maintain and foster conversation, even given the institutional character under which we're all captive, becomes part of the radicalizing potential for how we think about art, poetry, poetics, and how we think about those things being mobilized.

So teaching is on the one hand a way to maintain a certain kind of hope, but it's not the fantasy of how to do that. There is also an institutional amnesia. Everything is built on a model of consumption—you use it up and then it's gone. In an institutional context the work you do is basically set up to be eroded. I ask students, or I prompt them to ask

themselves, how does one become part of an enterprise which fights that sort of institutional amnesia, how can you take on and perpetuate connections between people that you had a genuine conversation going with. Perhaps the meaning of negotiating all of these issues is so like the meaning of writing a poem that I can actually do it, in that cusp between possibility and impossibility.

Y: So in teaching, writing and reading poetry you see the potential for community making?

M: Yes; you can no longer so easily participate in this kind of perimeter making that is perpetuated by the Institution. For instance, any act of reading releases you from a separate divisive place which we all occupy the more and more privatized economical conditions under which we live become. We have so few collective models left. Reading is almost the closest thing I can think of that alerts you to take into account a whole other "ecosystem" of someone else's being.

Y: Looking at reading then as an act of community building, the kind of attention that it takes to read someone else's work well is the kind of attention it takes to understand someone else well enough to embrace them.

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Y: Can you talk about your work in relation to various established avant-garde traditions or other traditions you might feel connected to or not?

M: Clearly what has informed my work, and what I find myself responding to, is work that signals with its very way of making itself that it has no assumptions about what the poem is—that the poem is what in fact emerges at that very moment of encounter, with your ear, with your psyche, with your body, with your historical condition. When you feel you're in the company of a writer who is inside undecided ability, you come into a negotiation through the writing act itself.

Many contemporary women writers have as their basic allegiance the question of putting into motion that which is one's experience. There's this amazing interplay between subjectivity, the world, your intellect, your cultural bearings, all the things you do and don't know—and then the practical question—how possible is it to maintain all those spheres as they come into the field of writing with no prior decisions about how the poem will bear out these considerations.

George Oppen has been very important to my writing. The



propositional character of both the Objectivists, and later, Projective Verse, address what we've been talking about today.

Y: In terms of your own writing practice, if you're trying to have that kind of breadth of content inclusion without having some kind of preconceived notion of what is going into the poem prosodically, how does form function?

M: Form is the body for speculation. Form is not necessarily a shapely, elegant thing—it is a live kicking wire, shaping, relating, relativizing...

Y: So you don't have any preconceived notion of form when you go into a poem?

M: Sometimes I'll know the architecture for something before I begin, but usually it breaks down. I have a visual sense of the form which I decide to act on or I start with large passages of writing and then find some kind of architecture announcing itself. Either way, form is fascinating because it is *enunciatory*.

Y: Are you working on anything right now?

M: My current project is a book-length poem with the working title, *ARCANA*. As a poet arrived at an uncanny familiarity with another language (Korean as an originary language)—as a poet attentive to acts of living between and among borders, interstices—I am aware of the nameable and often unnameable ways in which practicing the poem, participating in tending the poem circulates questions of national narratives, transcultural narratives, narratives of cultural and political diaspora, and concepts or perhaps more accurately, hybridizations, of human community.

The first movement of *ARCANA* is finished; the particularities of rhythm, lyric pressure, a myriad of formal investigations and other issues that have emerged in writing the first movement have me listening for how these and related concerns will carry themselves into the second and final movement.

Of the various procedures I am exploring, I find myself particularly drawn to what I am provisionally describing as "conflations" of Korean and English texts. I set in concurrent motion a text in Korean and a text in English—these texts are to be read "simultaneously." It is not the actual translation or even the state of translatability between the two texts that intrigues me but the possibilities for transcribing what occurs in the grafting between the two languages (and by implication,

between the two "nations," their mutually inflected histories of colonizations, socio-political conflicts, and so on). What drives my interest here is the recombinant field/energy created between languages (geographies, geopolitical economies, cultural representations)—a calculus of "new" cadences, prosodies, and registers in the service of rendering experience.

*Dialogue in Translation*

Recently I called up a number of friends and family and asked them what expectations they'd had growing up and how these expectations changed over time.

Duncan: the idea of falling in love with someone... I always thought I'd meet someone and we'd hook up & it never happened.

P-Butt: I expected that everybody would want the best for me—like the whole world wanted... it's in line with disappointment—that you'd be appreciated for what you do.

Grandma Pam: that you grew up and got married and lived happily thereafter. I expected easy street; I didn't know life would be so exacting, demanding, and difficult. (I read too many of Kathleen Norris's books...) I was a damnfool.

I wanted to know in what fashion their ideas of "how life goes" got translated into their experience.

Steve: timeframes—like at 21 be done with college, 22 be married with a family and house... I didn't envision being 24 & 25 and still in school still finishing a credential. Timeframes, you know, things just get moved back a bit.

Joel: It will have to be about religion somehow ... that aspect of religion—what you would hope out of religiosity—love, respect, nurturing—and then to witness the hypocrisy and neuroticism of it...

Deb: marriage—thinking that marriage would last forever and then realizing that it wasn't necessarily that way... when I was younger... when my parents got divorced...

either that or the tooth-fairy.

Often I've thought that what seems possible for us is greatly dictated by our earliest declarations and training.

Nanda: Because I had a critical upbringing, I expected the world to be an unfriendly place and it's not.

Jon: that you can change the way your society is run.

Laurie: I've come to realize that the validation I was expecting as a human being isn't always available, especially to women.

*tidal charts  
numbered verse  
red hymnal  
operations*

Writing has become a means of unraveling (or at least reconsidering) my experience and how it is constituted. How do the stories we learn implicate us in them? In their language? In how we come to "mean" ourselves? Certain poets intentionally work to recreate tonal registers, sound, and how we're taught to listen:

Scalapino:  
past pressure as 'the day' of crawling  
to view swans  
in one or at all.  
swans rose  
not dawn—being only.  
—one's interior is in relation to swans.

Collobert:  
inhabits the wait—  
frames the space around itself  
words as targets perhaps  
concentration of scattered story  
the living absolute—the writing there

so that to see it—knows itself there  
—in the word—does not reach  
completion

*sand from the toe  
an old boot lightening*

*oral history: pathology*

As a woman writing, I recognize calls for a difference in vision and the necessary struggle with this—

*we as occurring*

*ordinary & can be found*

*renewal/other voices*

*project*

Open: One would have to tell what happens in a life, what choices present themselves, what the world is for us what happens in time, what thought is in the course of a life and therefore what art is, and the isolation of the actual.

The task becomes to reinvent what's possible; to blindside language to the point of being able to revive it, re-encounter it.

*the bottom fall out  
house down tumble down  
latticed overhang give way*

*the door off its hinge  
where it wasn't once before  
car trouble, noise measured distance*

erratum and inheritance

*blossom*

The process becomes an investigation of how poetry transforms/  
absorbs/enacts language and the voices that shape us become the work  
and its versions.

*about an open mouth  
the thoughts we bring  
to our own concerns  
translated*

# Writing Degree Xerox

## notes

X. In a xerox degree culture, all art aspires to the condition of the Absolut ad. It seems as though simulacra has colonized expression; the existential concern with authenticity has been ceded by the "individual" to the terrain of the commodity. How then to avoid the commodification of writing (and of self) becomes a paramount issue.

Difference replicates itself to the point where all utterances begin to appear equal: difference=sameness=indifference. In a consumption model, we celebrate as choice (democracy) the "or" in "Coke or Pepsi," but the "or" is really an "and." Off in the distance, "tomorrow" becomes a video game. "Replace horizon with an equals sign" (Palmer).

So to counter: L decidedly *not* = A, class *not* dismissed. Not "*viva la difference*" for sake of more flavors (accumulation), but to *differentiate*. Not celebrating the present (and its tropes) simply because it is here. Rather (paraphrasing Jameson), we must attempt to think the present historically in an age that can only think itself *hysterically*.

E. The writing that follows is from a long work in progression, a project with a built-in obsolescence of sorts. Forfeiting (for the time being?) any hope for an "outside," the work investigates (in/as process) the possibilities for critique (as *active, productive*) from within (and through) the schizophrenia of an always-already mediated process of articulation. It is (by necessity?) doomed to failure from the "start," accepts that (provisionally?), and, *taking pains not to take pleasure*, inhabits that failure and ("can't go on, must go on") *proceeds*. Failure meaning can-only-replicate, as well as: in order to "succeed" (by its own terms) it must so exemplify the symptoms under investigation that it becomes unpleasurable to read/write. One should hate the work, but if one hates it, one won't continue to read, unless in order to hate it more, which is not hating but enjoying-hating. This writing hates itself, too, but as yet cannot find a "way out," short of (not-ending-but) stopping, also a failure. The masochism of self-critique is a tired mode of arrogance, of course, so it's in there, too, alongside the abject embrace of (im)pure *spew*, the much-too-zeitgeisty form of paratactical assault on a language already overburdened by (sincere, but misplaced?) *intent*.

R. The writing that follows is trying to maintain sincerity in a time when irony presents itself as the last recourse of cynicism. Working itself through (among much else) Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* and Wolfgang Fritz Haug's *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*. "A poetics is articulated in order to be transcended" (Silliman). So this is—?

Wondering if references shut folk out and/or merely extend the alienating effect. Why privilege cleverness? And, as always, what's being left unsaid, who in what glossies reads what in which languages? Does it help to know Lobengula was the Shona chief who started the *Chimurenga* wars against the British in 1896-97? That "taxis" is half of "parataxis?"

Still—to keep at rope's length? Sincerity itself becomes framed within its own rhetoric, returning (us) again to *integrity of intent*. To merely landscape the crisis is not an aesthetics, nor is aggro-explication. (We) need to (once more) find a mode of *address* to implicate (ourselves) in and against the contemporary moment. All else is spectacle and forfeiture.

O. Or—

One thinks oneself into a (corner/box/etc.) and tries to write oneself out.

X. And in so doing—

—finding and/or setting traps—as strategies to enact spaces for tactics?  
—suspending disbelief (cynicism?) to forge new (not-meta-but) provisional narratives—of—to grapple with/for?  
—articulating community as a more-than—having-talked as hyposthenics?

(though, and still—)

—pessimism of the intellect(ual)—ineffect(ual)?  
—eschatological pressures of theory-speak—"all prejudices come from the intestines"—(Nietzsche)—which means what ends?  
—mere shorthand epistemology, in tropes or slogans—lingo *franca*?

(but-so—)

—again, bringing (us) to—"what is to be done?"



Last things first, which is to start out from where we are going. "As the sky mentions blue." How "talk is a way of not looking," is surplus, is quite inexpensive. That's action, work back from far afield to water the past with not-tears, not-blood, but with who-built-what. Says who, says the dead, seven men forever in the concrete dam at Zambezi Gorge.

Disparate times call for disparate measures. Everyone participates, which is to say complacency is complicit. "He likes to see the money on the screen." Many would rather be entertained, many desire more movies to chose from. Only one who has tried has the right to disappointment. "(We) have become accustomed to everything."

Do you moan or vent, or do you own or rent. This product made with 80% post-consumer waste. All technology points, and "time does not finish the poem." By way of saying, inconclusively, conjecture's root, tired of play, lines in street, irony as name-calling. Roots of names, of volumes, of alphabets, or roosts of. Fold into the little red book. This.

Even the news isn't new enough. *Id est*, "association is the skeptic's epistemology." Syndication, *repeat*, syndication and/or anarcho-cynicalism. It's youth's mere stage, who's *fort* and who's *da*. Each thing, not-dead, pulsing futurity, onward entropic fuck-lust. Each silence has its echo, *say what*. What I really want to say. Its own end, is.

If only the lumpens. If only Fanon, as if voluntarily, as in "justification." One wants to taste the shape of it, the shape of things to come. "He is quoting." The letter S, the letter E, the letter X. When did exploitation become nostalgic, when did movies get the vote. Collect calling, bankroll a door lock, hock up the specs. *This my feeble protest*. Tickle me, landlord.

Powderkeg people, how do (we) get lit, in the library or through the pipeline. Or do we wait, tense, "pre-millennial," so says the TV, we are ingredients for what. Going nowhere, utopic, who wants to lead or follow, who wants more chips. *You bet your life*. Is this mere conscientious abjection, is this finger-in-socket, is this as if.

Tick, tick, that is faux-naif, that is cynical, perchance to dream? Pierce the social, hey, there's an inroad, a spectre, a tracing, or call it the stain, of history, of pinpricks and/or jetfuel. In kilowatt-hours, it has to burn for it to shine. In semio parlance, it has to shine for it to sign. In legalese, it has to sign here to be purchased. Cannot exchange for tinderbox, why not.

Does spontaneity need a quorum. Talkback, make "history," intentionality jam. And yet one looks for it, looks for outlines, for favorite colors. Read is one of them, having-done-so and in-order-to, collectivity is the rainbow at the end of the gold. If clever, then pointless? Ah lube, *a luta continua*. Insert "metaphysic of effect." Now this: what=ends=how.

"Belief also happens." Doubt thought, not experience, not wheelchairs. Has one earned the writing, protest-ants? One doesn't know what to do. For instance: a blue guitar is made of blue and of guitar and more than that. "One moment of sincerity threatens to disclose everything." She called them Lost and Found. I'm writing that I'm crying right now. Its.

"A slogan will not suffice." This will be my only reference to Wittgenstein. Nostalgia for a perfect game, or put the X in the middle to start with. To market, foreign language, pipe up the Luddite, word for "as" or "because," chalklines or cable of real imitation butter. "Mean." The name of my name. *There is sincerity here, trying to get out.*

Guilt infects solitude, aimlessness itches. No newflash is good company for avant-capital *lettres*, what time does the bar close. One beer, two beers, three beers, politics. Peel back, archeologos, dedarwinize basketball and/or famine. Choose which and tally. What to do, what to do, nailbiting is compensatory and balance is boring. Next.

Where is the emotion, not on the surface. *I refuse.* Does one have to glam voidancy to link psychical and social abjections. Go back to Freud, find a footnote, I mean a reason. I mean a buried resistance, I mean the color maroon, networks. Channels of and for, that aren't commerce, that are uncaptialized. *The lower world is all that is the lower case.*

One thing after another, so tautology and/or experience. What you see is what you see. Or what seems is what seems, this is an argument. Listen to the furniture, smell the varnish in the Cage, what seems, what seethes. Notate the teeth to not taint the Marx. And then if then, the Marx in all of us. You too, fuckbuddy, rock the votic.

How to chart loss, again. "Only bacteria are individuals." Cabral called for class suicide, not thrift stores on Valencia. He was an agronomist, he cleaned guns with butter. Six men in a Lisbon bar, did they know Pessoa? Did they know Lobengula, do we, can we read his X, have we eaten from his sickly cattle, what cultural exchange is this. Then as now.

Critique is easy, such men are boring holes. Who builds bricks by hand, where is the body of Isabelle Eberhardt. Learn me to irrigate, how to mail-bomb, how. Who killed Lucy Parsons, who follows orders. For once, one reconstructs epistemologies of accounting and/or accountability. Where is the coal up Frederick Taylor's ass, must be worth millions.

Wanting more organicism, more Gramsci to make grumpy. What does Grenada need more, email or tarmac. More rice, was it jade or pearl, and that was only 15 years ago. Meanwhile, who's an intellectual, are they jaded or purloined. Who builds what, what units exchange. Can openers bilingual, airmail *kwacha*. How to go to university, that is a language.

Looking, always looking, always looking good. Anything can start a forest fire, thus the following important messages from our sponsors. This isn't pressure, it's just *information*. "But now the beached whale is us." This a record of trying to construct a chronotopos, so there must be a body to breathe here. The situation in Liberia, it's still there at 2 am.

Dig up all the bones, even Ian Smith's. Testament is no tribute alone. "Who" "are" "we"? What history is in huts, in railroads, in brick ovens, in pop rocks. As metropolises implode, desertify duty. The west remains its own museum of the universal. Masochism's *divertissement*, download a gasoline necklace with what theory. History's "now," where is it.

Manifestos become banal next to "the real thing." From where does vantage point, to what set of paratactics. No things but in ideas? Style laces itself in pretty nouns; to verb is agency. That is, paces in small frames require more turnings. How praxis one-ups theoretic in performativity, or, sentences add up, but as calories do?

Or is history's use by complainant X, for what purpose. Contrarian's rhetoric is not disavowal, but a searching for, by working—against? What avenues critique, whose Paris of what epoch? Tropes beguile themselves, sexy theory wants what future. One's honey makes it sweeter, and "practicality needs a new pair of shoes." *Humble it down.*

"My vocabulary did this to me." There is no such thing as mock-heroic. Is it serious funny or ha-ha funny. Who laughs when taking it to the B of A. Accumulation as a putting-off? Of death and taxis? This line seeks revenge on all the others. Sure, but he drives a *minivan*. The number 2000 somehow complicit. If you are outside, get into the open.

If there is no outside, then one is in a building, looking through-at windows. Is writing winex or wrapping for bricks? "Late capitalism is the new avant-garde." Time now to defetishize, screw loose framings. We need feminism, now more than ever—if I count my syllables, then am I clever. Pets are always sincere; it is easier to say no than to say yes.

Reality laughs at metaphor's extension of itself. Scare quotes placate, whose sincerity of what epiphenomenon. To scrim is to avoid the "." in "?" If there are no angels, is there only looking back. What does one read mostly: books, billboards, or manuals. "Oooo, formy." Why should land reform matter only over there? Does writing needs a new pair of shoes?

movies? *On TV?* Do people kiss on  
 ou waiting for something big to happen?  
 expecting Mr. Right? *Are you hoping to*  
*be the big night?* Are you wishing so  
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*The primal scene, like in the movies?*  
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 ? Do people kiss on TV? *What do you*  
*seeking?* The primal kiss, like in the  
*On TV?* Do people kiss on TV? Are you  
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 ? *Are you hoping to be the big night?* Are  
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 e you waiting for something big to happen?  
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*will be the big night?* Are you

Romanic Lure  
 molly hankwitz

Romanitic Lure  
molly hankwitz

As of December 31, 1997, the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University no longer maintains a paid position of Archivist for the American Poetry Archives. The Poetry Center, like too many arts organizations nationwide, has felt the effects of cutbacks in the NEA. Unfortunately, the University chose not to take this opportunity to show its support and extend the necessary funding to continue this crucial position.

The loss of Archives Director Laura Moriarty will undoubtedly be felt by those in the Bay Area community and beyond. The American Poetry Archives have been an invaluable resource for students, faculty, and community members for twenty-four years, and has enriched the diversity of the literary community by making itself available to any and all who have an interest in writing, writers, and contemporary literary history. Without the continuation of the Archivist position, this tremendous resource will be under great pressure to maintain the high standard of excellence established during Laura Moriarty's leadership. Simply put, while the Archives will continue to exist at the SFSU Poetry Center, ultimately they will be underutilized and compromised.

Following is a memorandum written by Laura Moriarty in October, 1997, regarding the termination of her position.

Are you hoping to-night will be the  
On TV? Do people kiss on TV? Are y  
seeking? The primal kiss, like in the  
Do people kiss on TV? What do y  
fill your insides? Are you studied in  
trouble? Do you wish you could find  
or someone to do something to you  
? The primal kiss, like in the movie  
ld find you? What do you and your  
ll be the primal kiss? Are you wishing  
expected to-night? Are you hoping  
re you waiting for something big to l  
, like in the movies? On TV? Do peo  
What do you and yourself seeking?  
studied in the art of seduction? Do be  
I could find something to fill your i  
something to you? Are you vulnerable?  
ke in the movies? Are you waiting for s  
at do you find yourself seeking? Th  
right? Are you wishing someone wou  
g Mr. Right? Are you hoping to-nigh  
ing for something big to happen? A



Memorandum

To: past, present and future users of the American Poetry Archives  
From: Laura Moriarty, Archives Director

Subject: ending of the Archives Director position

7 October 1997

"Everything that happens to us is history" is the first line in my introduction to the *Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives Videotape Catalogue 1974-1990*. It is also the last line in my book *L'Archiviste*, published in 1991. It has been my pleasure to be involved in preserving a part of this history for the last eleven years as Director of the American Poetry Archives for the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University.

My particular goal in managing the Archives has been to make our video and audio collection, one of the largest of its kind in the world, as accessible as possible. My motto has been "everyone who wants a tape, gets a tape."

The fact that many times I was providing images of the friends, colleagues and relatives whose readings are among the thousands in our collection has made this a very personal task.

When a high school student calls and wants to know who the African-American writers in the collection are and I can provide a detailed list, waive the membership fee and send a tape for her presentation, the whole thing seems worth it. When Allen Ginsberg dies and I can help put a tape of him reading on the national news, again it seems worth it. However—worth it or not, my position ends as of 31 December this year. Due to funding cuts at the National Endowment for the Arts and other funding organizations and the inability, so far, of San Francisco State University to come up with financial support for the position, it will remain unfilled indefinitely.

There have been many projects at the Poetry Center in the last decade (and 297 readings) and I have been involved in most of them. Among my accomplishments are the publication of the *Poetry Center Catalogue 1974-1990*, editing the thirteen issues of the *Archives News*, including catalogue addenda, producing three sixty-minute video anthologies (*Women Working in Literature*, *Palabra* and *Color*), overseeing two large video and film preservation projects, working with the San Francisco Arts Commission to have writers' words engraved on Muni bus islands on Market Street, and seeing that the entire catalogue of our videotapes is now available on our Web site.

Archives Video Technician Jiri Veskrna will be continuing to tape the Poetry Center series. He will do what Archives maintenance

he is able to do within his half-time position. Other staff will also do all they can. However, Archives functions will necessarily be limited.

I want to thank Executive Director Jewelle Gomez for her great efforts to keep the Archives position going as long as possible. Thanks also to the three other executive directors I have worked with, Frances Phillips, Bob Glück and Rose Catacalos, for their superhuman efforts to raise funds to retain the two unfunded Archives positions, while funding all other Poetry Center programs. Thanks to Associate Directors Dawn Kolokithas, Lisa Bernstein, Aaron Shurin and Toni Miroseovich and to Operations Managers Larry Price, Karen Clark, Zack Rogow and Melissa Martell Black. Each name represents a world of work.

Thank you for your help, now and over the years, and thanks in advance for supporting my successor (if there should ever be such a person) in his or her efforts to continue to make your history available to you.

Laura Moriarty  
Archives Director

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To encourage San Francisco State University to fund the position of Archivist for the American Poetry Archives, please send the following letter, or your own letter, both to San Francisco State University President Robert A. Corrigan and to Jewelle Gomez, Executive Director of the Poetry Center. Their addresses are:

President Robert A. Corrigan  
San Francisco State University  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco CA 94132  
corrigan@sfsu.edu

Jewelle Gomez, Executive Director  
The Poetry Center  
San Francisco State University  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco CA 94132



President Robert A. Corrigan  
San Francisco State University  
1600 Holloway Avenue  
San Francisco CA 94132

Dear President Corrigan,

We understand that yet again San Francisco State University has decided not to fund the position of Archivist at the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archive. And so, after 24 years and 6 complete print catalogues, with 3 sixty-minute video anthologies (Archive productions), 20 issues of the *Archive News*, footage of countless writers placed with many national and international news broadcasters, viewings of Archive tapes at festivals such as the Venice *Biennale* and other major venues world-wide, and now the entire Archive catalogue on-line (of what is to date the largest literary audio and video collection available to the public), the Archive will sit inert "in state" in its state-of-the-art climate-controlled vault on the top floor of the Humanities Building.

There will be no individual whose job it is to be responsible for lending, renting, selling and sending Archive materials to students, faculty, scholars and poets; no one to assist and respond to queries and orders from institutions and independent researchers all over the world; no one to educate interns in archiving, cataloguing, editing and Web page maintenance, and involve them in film and video preservation projects; and, although at the moment there is still a videographer, there will be no one to coordinate the successful videotaping of every Poetry Center event on and off campus (the activity that has resulted in this unique and priceless documentation of the development of American poetry over the last 25 years).

We want to voice and register our profound dismay at such an unnecessary loss. We ask you to reconsider rather than let this treasured and irreplaceable living resource turn to dust.

Sincerely,



Since 1983 Sri Lanka has been ravaged by a war between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority. It is estimated that some seventy-five thousand lives have been lost.

In 1991 Sri Lanka's Northern Jaffna Peninsula was controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known as the LTTE. In the south, the ruling United National Party declared a State of Emergency. This authorized the capture and detention of civilians without official charge or guarantee of trial for at least eighteen months. This law was useful in silencing the many groups which stood in opposition to the ruling party. It was August 30th of that year that Thiagarajah Selvanithy (known as "Selvi"), a Tamil poet/playwright/feminist/activist, was abducted from her home by members of the Tamil Tigers.

Typically Sri Lanka's women have taken the lead in the movement towards peace and reconciliation, and the "Mothers' Front," founded by the mother of executed Tamil writer Richard de Zoysa, contained, in 1992, some forty thousand women. In 1989, Mrs. de Zoysa and Selvi helped found Poorani, a women's shelter in Udaval open to all ethnicities. The center was set up to aid women struggling to survive in wartime, many of whom had been raped.

Little is known about Selvi's past. Her Tamil mother raised Selvi and her siblings on a Chili Farm which she ran single-handedly some eighty miles south of Jaffna. While in her early twenties, Selvi joined the marxist People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam. Disillusioned by internal conflict and disintegration, Selvi eventually disassociated herself and entered the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna, where she also founded the feminist magazine, *Tholi*. She had hoped to graduate in 1992.

According to those who knew her, Selvi was unusual in her willingness to criticize the LTTE for its violence. Concerned with the growing unrest in Sri Lanka and the deplorable situation for women in general, her creative work was overtly political. Her poetry, which appeared in the University's publication as well as the weekly *Thisai*,

condemns the violence brought upon the people of Sri Lanka by the armed conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese. She also wrote and produced two plays, one about rape and the other about dowry payment. The day before her abduction, Selvi was preparing to star in a play concerning the role of women in the Palestinian Intifada.

Not much is known of her status since the abduction and reports are often conflicting. Some of the earliest reports indicated that she had been jailed and then taken to a local hospital (she is asthmatic), while others claimed that she had already been killed. In the November 1991 issue of the Sri Lankan magazine *Counterpoint*, a spokesman for the LTTE responded to a question regarding Selvi's safety by saying, "... as far as I know, yes. I'm willing to assure that she's alive because we know that there is some pressure..."

The pressure the spokesman alluded to included a major campaign launched by PEN International on Selvi's behalf. Selvi was made an honorary member of the American and English PEN Centers and in 1992 she was awarded the PEN American Center's Freedom to Write Award and, in 1994, Amnesty International's Poetry International Award.

As a result of the Poetry International Award, Her Majesty's Embassy in Colombo made extensive inquiries regarding Selvi's fate. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs, the result of these inquiries made it clear that Selvi is "probably no longer alive." The report suggested that she was executed by the LTTE towards the end of November 1993, as she was considered a traitor on the basis of "incriminating material."

Sara Whyatt of PEN International wrote in 1994 that "...although it is not unlikely that she was killed, it has been suggested that she could still be alive and that the rumors may have been deliberately circulated to stop the campaign on her behalf."

The most recent report from Canadian PEN is that Selvi has been confirmed dead by four Embassies.

Very little of Selvi's work has been translated from Tamil into English. None of her plays have been translated and we were able to secure only two of her poems, "Undying Gardens," and "I would be sand." These translations were done by a professor of South Asian Language at the University of Chicago, A.K. Ramanujan. Unfortunately, he died several years ago and we were not able to inquire further.

While it is not known whether these poems were written in direct response to being jailed, or if they were intended to chronicle the general abuse before she herself was imprisoned, they clearly reflect the extreme political situation within which she lived. Danger is at the forefront of her work, as is the fatigue of someone who struggles daily

for her beliefs. If she has indeed been killed, then these poems remain as singular evidence of a young woman writer and activist committed to social justice, freedom of expression, equality, and art.

As Carolyn Forché writes in *Against Forgetting*, poetry of extremity is "an apostrophe to a fellow marcher, and so it is not only a record of experience but an exhortation and a plea against despair. It is not a cry for sympathy but a call for strength."

#### Suggestions for Action:

According to Teresita Schaffer, United States Ambassador to Sri Lanka for the Presidential Commission to Investigate the Disappeared, "since the Sri Lankan authorities have no jurisdiction over the Tamils, those concerned may try writing to the Embassy in Colombo, asking them to indicate to the LTTE that Ms. Selvanithy's situation has aroused international concern."

Write to:

U.S. Embassy / 210 Galle Road / Kollupitiya, Colombo 3 / Sri Lanka.

On September 11, 1995, Amnesty International sent a letter to the LTTE office in London. The LTTE sent back a ten page manifesto expressing its beliefs but offered no specific information about Selvi. Still, voicing concern to those at the LTTE office in London may be helpful.

Write to:

Central Committee of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam / 54 Tavistock Place / London WC1H 9RG / United Kingdom.

Contact PEN New York for more information: (213) 334-1660.

(Information compiled by Yedda Morrison and Celia Homesley in May 1996)

*Undying Gardens*

I've grown feeble.  
Do not bother me with questions.  
My heart that hangs on a thread  
will fall and explode  
any moment.

The asoka garden isn't something dead  
in the past.  
This very house  
is an asoka garden made especially for me.  
But my captor  
is not Ravana, but Rama himself.\*

That moment when I happened to see  
Rama change into Ravana  
turning his back on me,  
changing his mask,

my heart shuddered.  
Who will come to rescue this Sita?

How long will these asoka gardens last?

—Selvi

translated by A. K. Ramanujan

*I Would Be Sand*

I would be sand,  
I would be pebble.

My spirit encircled by betrayals  
waits for life.  
Wherever I turn,  
primitive humans,  
mouths of filth and yellow teeth  
slobbering  
drinking blood and tearing flesh,  
cruel nails and eyes

The noises and dances  
of triumph  
are nothing new.

I've lost my legs  
looking for thrones  
in starry dreams.  
Cheated of full moons,  
I'm left weary.

Imaginations bred on the blessings  
of gods in heaven  
have melted like morning dew,  
leaving them dry black blades of grass.

How long shall we go round and round  
like oxen on the furrow?  
What's gained by living immersed  
in noise and filth?

It's not easy to find  
bright days.  
Yet in these dim skies,  
I must seek my light.\*

translated by A. K. Ramanujan

*\* At the time of this poem, Selvi's lover had fled for the safety of India. According to Siobhan Dowd, in an April 1992 issue of Literary Review, Selvi examined the option of exile (one which many Sri Lankan writers took during those years) but was convinced that she must remain in Sri Lanka to continue the struggle for freedom and justice.*

\* In the epic Ramayana, Ravana is the demon of Lanka who abducts Sita and imprisons her in a garden of asoka trees. Rama, the hero and husband, lays siege to Lanka and rescues Sita. In this poem, the husband is himself the captor. Here Selvi examines the transformation of ones' beloved into ones' captor. This may refer to her dedication to the Tamil separatist movement and her eventual break with the LTTE which led to her imprisonment by the very people with which she had aligned herself. The subject matter, while perhaps eluding direct translation by the foreign reader, is bold in that all Sri Lankans are at the very least aware of and most revere the ancient epic of Ramayana.

# A Reading of Against:

## Juliana Spahr as poet, editor, and critic

It may say something about the continued valorization of authorship that much contemporary poetry criticism tends, with rare exceptions, to focus almost exclusively on a person's poetry as a way of evaluating her literary activity. Granted, the main goal of literary activity continues to be the creation of significant literature. Nonetheless the activity that supports that creation consists of far more than a writer using a pen or a computer. Paradoxically, writing itself is often the least socially empowered instance in the process of literary creation. New writing cannot appear without a whole network of developmental activities, a network that includes editors willing to publish such writing, sources of money that enable those editors to create publications, and the standards (mainly capitalist) which control the allocation of most resources. Small self-published editions can avoid some of the resulting problems, but only to a limited degree. While it may be difficult in many cases to determine to what extent writing itself changes because of the writer's awareness of the publishing environment, successful writers usually have some sense of how to navigate in this environment, even when they intend to circumvent it. Most writing appears only with the help of such developmental activities, however much it remains different from them.

One cannot understand the significance of Juliana Spahr's work in contemporary poetry unless one recognizes the above problem. Reference to her poetry alone ignores the variety of her contribution to literature. I do not mean that her poetry cannot stand on its own. Rather, her poetry needs to be seen as only one piece of her literary activity, which includes critical writing and a series of key editorial roles.

After learning much about the nuts and bolts aspects of literary production through several years work at the literary press Station Hill, Spahr became, along with myself, one of the founders of Leave Books. Leave Books was from the first a cooperative enterprise; members of the editorial board at various times included Kristin Prevallet, Pam Rehm, Elizabeth Burns, Brigham Taylor, Marta Werner, and several others, all of whom have gone on to contribute significantly to contemporary poetry. Yet cooperative ventures by no means necessarily create unfractional cooperation, or a balanced division of labor. The bulk of the work of Leave quickly and continuously became Spahr's. While editorial decisions remained always a group vision, nonetheless it was her commit-

ment to keeping that vision alive that enabled Leave, over a five-year period from 1991-95, to publish almost 100 chapbooks, many by the finest young avant-garde poets in the country, and some by older, more established writers with differing influences.

Leave was concerned with crossing a number of well-established boundaries, publishing not only language poets, New American poets, and even more traditional poets like Bin Ramke, but also many younger writers for whom those boundaries were not a given but a site of question and critique. Criticisms of Leave, privately voiced in the main, often claimed that its project was too directionless, too unwilling to stake a singular territory of language practices which it promoted. Yet in many of its editorial groupings, the mission of Leave Books seemed strikingly clear. We were interested neither in identifying our publications with a specific school of poetic production, or with claiming some amorphous sense of "being open to everything" that hid its ideological interest in only certain types of work. Rather, we were interested in publishing work whose range challenged both these extremes, through a conscious critique of the binary mirror that these two stances often become. We were interested not only in publishing poetry and short fiction that crossed various boundaries; one of our primary concerns from the first was also to publish work that called into question differences between criticism and poetry.

In its last years, Leave did manage to publish several larger, perfect bound books with larger production runs and broader distribution. One of these, *A Poetics of Criticism*, took up directly the opposition between "critical" and "creative" practice:

Collected here are a number of essays exploring alternative modes of critical writing—essays in dialogue, essays in quotation, essays in poetry, essays in letters. Nonstandard in their forms, they confuse the genre of the academic essay. Many of the contributors to this book are poets who through an intense interest in the varying possibilities of language have defined a unique critical perspective (*A Poetics of Criticism*, 7).

Yet the goal of exploring these alternative modes was not simply to offer "new possibilities" because they were interesting. Despite many examples of nonstandard essay practices, almost all academic publications in the U.S. still feature critical essays only with standard linear arguments and a normative academic monotone:

Although the rise of cultural studies in the late eighties and early nineties teased at allowing a new articulation of criticism within the academy, not much has changed in terms of the possible forms of criticism. But literary criticism, if it is to achieve



greater generative significance as a cultural creation, needs to engage its own fear of writing. It needs to become the subject of its own engagement, giving itself over to the dangers and fluidities and challenges of that possibility. At the very least, contemporary literary culture needs to recognize other forms of writing as critical and to grant them some measure of authority in academic institutions (PC, 7-8).

Spahr's own essay in *A Poetics of Criticism*, "A, B, C: Reading Against Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein," opens by making her interest in boundary crossing explicit:

To propose a connection between Dickinson and Stein is to insist on a misconnection, or a refiguring of connection. Neither reads the other. Dickinson limited by the inexorable irreversibility of time; Stein by inadequate editions of Dickinson. But not merely a connection (a long distance phone call), for there is also a necessity. Literary criticism likes to cluster around readings of connections—Coleridge and Wordsworth as the beginning of romanticism; Hawthorne and Melville as the beginnings of the American renaissance; Pound and Eliot as the beginning of modernism. These connections are used to establish schools, similarities. But with such a system, a canon of exclusion has been created, a history of authority (PC, 281).

What Spahr, proposes, then, is a "reading of against" (PC, 281). Against, that is, the traditional lineages of historicist readings of schools and conscious influence, all designed to establish that literary history can be read "authoritatively" only in certain ways. Her essay thus disrupts our ability to think in terms of poetic "schools," and the way such "schools" become co-opted into histories of canon formation. Spahr does not perform this argument in the standard critical language of the so-called "objective observer;" although the form of Spahr's essay is more normative than some in the book, she nonetheless disrupts that norm through anachronistic, ahistorical metaphors too consciously poetic for standard criticism. The metaphorical interruption "a long distance phone call" violates the standard form of such criticism, as do other ellipses on the level of both grammar and content throughout the essay.

When Leave Books finally ceased production, Spahr's next editorial project, *Chain*, which she continues to co-edit with Jena Osman, became the forum in which she would highlight the problems of editorship first apparent in Leave. What Spahr and Osman address in *Chain* is that being an editor is fundamentally a problem of authority. There's

no way around the fact that an editor is the final decision maker about what does and does not appear in her publication; although her readership may respond to her choices, she is nonetheless in this context the final arbiter. How does one reconcile that fact with a desire to critique currently existing forms of authority? That is the problem that Spahr and Osman first confront in "Editor's Note: Frameworks," their discussion of the dynamics of editorship that appears in *Chain* 1. Interestingly, the first level on which they critique the role of editorial norms is the organization of the book itself. Their editorial comments occur midway through the magazine, rather than at the beginning, thus making their editorial voices appear as an integral part of the text, rather than as a frame which stands prior to or outside it. The article focuses on a self-aware exploration of their own roles as editors of *Chain*:

It is impossible to make a frameless frame (although that is the vision from which this project derived). We have instead begun the journal with a forum that takes a look at how and why journals are created and in what ways questions of gender informed those decisions. It sounds absurd to edit a journal that's about the editing of journals—a nightmare of self-reflexivity—and yet it is a way of creating a body that shows its own skeleton. Instead of putting together a collection that claims over and over the ability of the editor to define ("hey! great outfit!"), we wanted to be able to say "this made itself and here is what it's made of; it is just a part of what continues" (129-130).

Taken to an extreme, that last statement is obviously a utopian impossibility; there's no way that Spahr and Osman can write themselves out of the authority of making decisions over what to include in the magazine. More importantly, though, *Chain*'s editors attempt to make the editorial process explicit, and to explore its built-in limitations.

*Chain* 1 consistently questions the dynamics of editorial activity from a gendered frame: "Women who edit hold a particular place in an established discourse of authority. Whether they think about it or not, they must evaluate their stance in relation to that realm" (131). Yet the editors continue to question whether a self-consciously gendered discourse provides a good basis from which to explore editorship. While the first issue of *Chain* (although not succeeding ones) features work only by women, the editors also point out that starting "a gender-centered forum is in some ways reinstating problematic narratives of gender" (130). Nonetheless, while women have always been writers, until recently the history of the editor as final arbiter of literary value has been exclusively male. Certainly, some male editors can be relatively more open, some female editors relatively more authoritarian. But in



the United States, for instance, the history of the male editor as having the authority to present his values and taste runs all the way back to the beginning of the American history of poetry anthologies, as Alan Golding's recent *From Outlaw to Classic* shows (3-40).

The form of Spahr and Osman's editorial comments itself reflects the dynamic of their editorial activity. Rather than a linear discussion of their project, "Editor's Note: Frameworks" presents a dialogue of response and counterresponse, frame and interruptions of frame. Thus, the "success" claimed in the quote above is immediately countered by a paragraph headed "Interjection:"

I disagree with the idea that we've been "successful" at opening up the journal to unfamiliar voices. Or at least it hasn't happened to the degree that we had hoped for when we came up with the concept (132).

*Chain 1* successfully critiques the role that authority plays in editorship, both by making explicit the dynamics of authority in the editorial process, and by enacting a new version of such authority. Taken together, these differences critique the authority of editors of more standardized journals, while suggesting other options for the editorial process.

## II.

The relation between Spahr's editorial and critical activity, and her work as a poet, is complex. There are no immediately obvious unities. In fact the relation between them requires a "reading of against" much like that Spahr suggests in her essay on Dickinson and Stein. Spahr's editorial activity is openly politically progressive, interested in challenging and undermining traditional modes of cultural and literary authority; if anything, Spahr might be criticized at times for overly utopian senses of what is possible. The voice of her editorial practices is forthright, open, and self-questioning, full of positive energy about the possibility of developing an alternative practice.

Spahr's poetry, however, is far darker. Its concerns with problems of gender and cultural identity explore various pathologies, and the forms of culture that both create and address pathology. Her *Leave Book* chapbook *Nuclear* details the social pathology that created nuclear weaponry. Uses of alien abduction ("Testimony"), of multiple personalities ("Thrasing Seems Crazy") or of horror films (*Choosing Rooms*) all explore what might be called the pathology of identity.

What I mean by "pathology of identity" is that trying to achieve an identity for oneself and one's culture often becomes, in Spahr's work, the source of pathology. Identity often turns out in her work to be the

attempt to represent oneself as oneself, to oneself and to others. Representing, in this case, means the desire to present oneself as a series of fixed images, means ultimately the desire to become *fixed*. But this desire, an attempt to control one's identity through a series of unmoving images of oneself and one's culture, becomes a pathological urge to control a fluctuating and indescribable reality. The urge is pathological because, in Spahr's work, the desire to present a fixed image of oneself and one's culture leads inevitably to violence, whether psychological or physical.

But while they may not be obvious, there are links between a progressive and open stance as editor and a grim exploration of violence as poet. One can see, in Spahr's editorial activity, a desire not to be fixed by the pathological pursuit of singular authority. Similarly, one can see in her poetry all the dangers of failing to question the beliefs that often lead to such authority.

Much of Spahr's poetry explores the implications of film technology. In poems like "The Letter," Spahr makes use of such effects as random splicing and montage to see how basic film technology—a series of static images run together to produce the illusion of motion—can alter the understanding of imagery in poetry. Spahr's sources are by no means limited to the traditional "high" art film. She's just as likely to borrow from talk shows and other forms of popular culture. While Spahr's work is theoretically sophisticated, her ability to appropriate the (ideologically loaded) visceral intensity of pop culture often gives her poetry the crash and burn intensity of a pop thriller gone haywire.

In the chapbook *Choosing Rooms*, Spahr borrows from the typical (if always useful) horror movie tale of bloodbath as metaphor for social relations, in which the only question is who's going to get hurt first: "is it more disturbing to mutilate the self or the bird? / to allow the mutilation of the self by an other?"

In *Choosing Rooms*, Spahr sees human beings as constructed out of social relations. But the constructions she describes are almost constantly brutalizing. Spahr's young white everywoman has her eyes forced open and discovers that she's Carrie, Stephen King's tortured highschool power source, covered in blood and vengeful hypocritical prayers. Such an "overblown" scenario is central to the power of horror movies, in which extremes of experience turn out not to be exceptions, but instead lie hidden in the supposedly banal world of the everyday. This self-consciously overblown theatricality is one of the main features of Spahr's poetry, an attempt to draw out, and draw large, that pervasive hidden horror.

The "rooms" in *Choosing Rooms* are really little torture chambers, in which prearranged scenes of pain and disconnection act themselves out in obsessive repetition:

in the room where we sit there are no answers  
but a corridor of live wires  
four metal rods mounted on wooden crosses  
batteries  
woman

a naked woman enters this room but is contained between the  
wires attached to the battery (*Choosing*, 15)

Here, the woman's flesh has been subjected to a painful nightmare machine. The audience, in which "we" are included by definition, has no way out of this torture chamber. Indeed "we sit" among the deadly live wires ourselves.

The word "Choosing" in the book's title is a bitter farce, like a condemned political prisoner "choosing" to be hung or shot. The reader of this book is an inevitable voyeur, participant and victim—the poems not only show readers scenes of torture, but get them actively involved. No *understanding* of the game is possible. Short of simply putting the book down and refusing to read it, your only choice is to become complicit with the tortures it enacts.

This lack of choice leads to a dark, unavoidable irony—*Choosing Rooms* wants to reveal torture, but also to inflict it. There is an astonishingly pitiless quality to almost all Spahr's poetry. It is without comfort, and any sympathy comes at best indirectly, from Spahr's implication that such things should not be. But even that implication is undermined by the desire to obsessively explore such torture again and again. Such ambiguous desire is one of the central problems of all horror literature; however much they may want to purge the experience of horror, readers and writers of such literature also want to *experience* horror, if only from the comforting safety of their own living rooms—rooms which turn out in *Choosing Rooms* to be neither comforting or safe.

In some ways, *Choosing Rooms* is a blueprint for the expanded set of concerns that appear in Spahr's first full-length poetry collection, *Response*. All Spahr's poetry runs in sequences closer to montage than collage; although she never has only a single point, the sequences direct us repeatedly to central problems. Although some of the sequential poems that make up *Response* had appeared earlier in other forums, the power of Spahr's poem sequences becomes more intense when brought together in one book, because the interconnections between Spahr's poems can be highlighted.

The first piece in *Response*, "introduction," opens with a question to which the rest of the book only apparently seeks an answer:

"how to tell without violating?" (*Response*, 9) I say apparently because the answer in much of *Response* is that telling itself is violation. The desire to represent one's experience, to tell it, becomes the means of extending a socially enforced confusion: "I held my self (child) and I was confused" (10). The desire to hold onto oneself, through image, through language, through response, leads inevitably in *Response* to splitting one's personality into image fragments, in this case that of the self and the child. These fragments are each meant to contain the whole person, or the whole society. But because they don't, they war with other fragments that equally imagine themselves whole.

In fact, the social landscape of contemporary experience turns out in the poem "responding" to be nothing more than these violently pathological fragmentary images:

This is a place without a terrain a government that always  
changes an unstable language. Even buildings disappear  
from day to day.

[gendered pronoun] wanders in this place  
[searching  
[waiting

the condition of unbearable is the constant state of mind  
for all occupants

(13)

This unbearable is marked first and foremost by an attempt to fix instability through singular sexual identities. Fixed into such singularity, though, an unbearable searching for one's missing fragments begins.

Throughout "responding," fixed identities are labelled, as they are above, not with specifics but with generic markings indicated by brackets:

or [name of major historical figure] hails a cab, [generic  
possessive human pronoun] hand raised here, beckoning  
as the red flag with [name of fast food chain] waves  
behind [generic human pronoun] and the red star on top of  
the [name of cultural landmark in major city] twinkles (19).

Paradoxically, the desire to control experience through a narrative that can give all things specific names leads to a circumstance in which the capacity to control through naming makes all specifics irrelevant.

That "thrasing seems crazy" is based on a story told on the Oprah Winfrey Show only adds to the lurid spectacle of its tale of multiple personalities. The reported story is as follows: a woman repeated-

ly was terrorized, and eventually stabbed, by a male stalker to whom she gave the name "the poet." Police were unable to find this man. Eventually, though, the facts were discovered; the woman was a victim of what is called "dissociative personality disorder," more commonly known as multiple personalities. The "man" who had stalked—and literally stabbed her with a knife!—had been *herself*, in a dissociative state.

In Spahr's poem, this story, while undeniably extreme, is nonetheless a prime example of the pathological desire to fix one's identity as singular. Oddly, having multiple personalities is not the problem. One implication of Spahr's poem is that we all have different personalities in different environments; rather, problems result when one can't recognize that one has multiple personalities:

in the story the hook is the artist's rendering of the stalker as  
described by the woman  
it is the woman in a man's face (41)

The "hook" takes on multiple meanings in the poem; it is the hook that captures and kills a fish, the hook that gets a reader to watch a program, and more centrally, the hook for the desire for fixity from which one hangs oneself. What's astonishing about the details in "thrashing" is their double significance; taken outside of the specifics of this woman's story, they actually describe *common* occurrences.

Similarly, "testimony" concerns not the oddity of alien abductees but their relation to the condition of others:

in the midst of myth or belief  
claims of an archetypal contact through symbology that begins  
fifty to one hundred years ago  
the stories gain fluency, even as they present questions

there might be a book called the Bible which contains all these  
reports  
the scrolls might be at the CIA headquarters in Langley,  
Virginia (59)

In "testimony," the growing history of alien abduction represents simply another socially developed holy symbology, another attempt to fix the meaning of mystery through image and language. "testimony" does not explore *whether* individuals have been abducted by aliens; rather, it concerns the social pathologies involved in reporting oneself as an alien abductee.

The second section of "testimony" includes a long list of

"reports" that describe images of abduction and define a world of violence, violation, and confusion. This world is intimately linked by those who report it to other, more clearly identifiable horrors, such as sexual abuse:

people claim to have been abducted  
claim to have been undressed and examined  
poked and prodded  
claim that there are complex reproductive enterprises involving  
conception and gestation or incubation of mixed beings (54)

Here, the phrase "mixed being"—which implies multiple or "impure" backgrounds and identities—is linked with abuse. But Spahr doesn't make this link to suggest that self-reported alien abductees are simply repressing human sexual abuse. The "facts of the case" are not the point; what's at issue is the desire to *fix* the facts. What Spahr wants to show is the similarity of language in all descriptions of abuse. She wants us to see the links between violence and language about violence. She wants us to understand that the ways in which people talk about abuse are themselves often abusive because of the tendency to control and deny differences. Thus, in contradiction to many psychotherapeutic practices, Spahr shows how descriptions of abuse often end up *sup - porting* abuse, becoming part of the problem rather than a cure.

The third section of "testimony" features language in quotes meant to imply that this language is supposedly direct testimony. Further self-reported links between alien abductees and other social horrors are suggested by the abductees themselves, in quotes such as "It is just like Auschwitz, just like Auschwitz," and "I have recurring nuclear war dreams" (61). A brief fourth section points out that "unreliability of information" is a social fact, and that belief in "reliable information" often reveals the pathological desire to fix reality.

In the poem's final section, the narrator speaks directly to the reader:

my point here is not the laugh  
not the truth  
not to merely explore truth's turns, information's conspiracies

it is:  
what do we do? (69)

Despite her unwillingness to impose conclusions on the text, Spahr does provide some possible answers to this question:



as we rethink ourselves, the political enters  
and the issue twists to become about our ability to touch  
information  
to make our own decisions  
which has been required of us all along, we've just slacked off  
letting the advertisements speak a larger truth  
letting others do our thinking and condense it back to us as a  
series of dialectical issues (73)

Of course, given the social dynamics of contemporary capitalism, one may not have the power to stop advertisements (and, by extension, all image-based and identity-based ideology) from "speaking." But Spahr wants us to understand the ways in which people participate in their own debasement to languages of violence. One may not be able to stop such "advertisements," but one can consistently contest their power.

In the final poem, "witness," section one has only one brief line: "when terrible things happen they must be witnessed" (77). This line questions the value of witness as practiced by Elie Wiesel and others; the urge to "witness," to tell and repeat scenes of violence so that they are not forgotten, can also increase the power of that violence to control human life by turning it into a tale.

The rest of "witness" follows through on that insight with the pitiless clarity typical of Spahr's poetry. Whatever the terrible event in question, "witnessing" is not a solution but an extension of many problems:

when does witness no longer witness?

when does faith turn to act?

why is everything reduced to letters, to abbreviations?

how does one write the question of letters and not appropriate  
or make bland?

(80)

The urge to witness, even when born out of the legitimate desire to have violence exposed, can turn quickly into an attempt to contain violence through representational images. Such false containment leaves the uncontainable aspects of violence to fester, with the result, undoubtedly, that they will emerge elsewhere again.

Finally, "witness" wants to make a space for those parts of human experience that will not be reduced to representative telling:

an attempt to speak to the human moment will occur  
in these moments someone touches someone  
someone claims to love someone  
someone moves closer to someone in prelude to a proposition  
someone waits outside for someone to come by  
someone becomes unable to live his/her life and succumbs

this is information that might be left out of witness  
yet it has a bearing that is all the more strong. (93)

These "human moments," all of them problems because of the claims to fixity that they make, nonetheless have an impact that the representational containment of "witness" will not be able to reach. In the last lines of this poem, and of *Response*, Spahr writes: "turn on the lights/ one person urges another/ turn on the lights" (97). The paradox implied is exactly as harsh, and as revealing, as the rest of the insights in the book. The person (indeed the culture) in darkness, seeking to bring clarity and hope into the darkness, finds only the pitiless, naked bulb, which offers no solution to the pain that it momentarily makes visible and extends. Light is not simply the same as darkness, but may even be worse.

It would be a mistake to reduce Spahr's activities to a singular direction, or to isolate one aspect of her writing as most important. Rather, her work significantly interconnects. One must look at the interplay between the communal openness of her editorial activity and the enclosed sequences of agony which her poetry often presents. But even that interplay implies "a reading of against." The interplay between editorship, criticism and poetry suggests an attempt to strike a balance between hope and despair. But for Spahr, any too certain balance is itself imbalance, and likely to deny unspeakable pain. One great significance of her work is that it refuses to allow readers a false balance that seems to contain violence, but actually only recreates it.

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*make shift*

*shoesaver*

"Remove shoes before entering playspace"  
—Burger King Playspace

this is not simply language. and it does not go without saying.  
whether it is or is not language, it does not go without saying.

They dig in. Digging a tunnel in into. They dig in,  
in a tunnel, into, & then they flower. flower & shed.  
Bursting in into the innermost. The guts.

It was held in common. If they were held in common. And it was  
working from that space where they were held. And that is the assem-  
blage assembling. Where it dissembled it is not language because it dis-  
sembles language and so it does not go without saying. going and not  
finding. or going. or just going in assemblage.

It was a small doll. Someone had bought a small  
doll wrapped in a green nylon coat or wrapper, a  
square wrapper such as on gum or cigarettes.  
held together by velcro. Velcro must be grasped  
and pulled open. And underneath the coat there  
is the body of the doll—vinyl, blocky. And dan-  
gling on a string behind the doll's body like a  
marionette—a small skeleton. Then it was said—  
"But didn't you know, inside every little girl there  
is the skeleton of an old man?"

Which is to say language. language dangling on the restless body.  
dull. vinyl. where the language dances in your bones. But you know.  
didn't. didn't you know? if pushed. your shoes are too big.

That was the fair. fair. or a fireman's festival. on  
a summer's night. as you like it. social. and, in  
your mouth, cotton. or melting. cotton. cotton.

And that's where it was. beside you. or between you. was & was  
apparently. or anything. force or the desire for a future. a certain type  
of it. was. on behalf. of language. and also a body as well. as well.

well. fair.

But we have no slogan. no slogans. only our shoes that go or we go  
our shoes. too big or too shiny or too old or too painterly or too expen-  
sive or too white or too ill-prepared or too ugly or too unkempt or too  
unbefitting, unbefitting a slogan.

So that is why it goes saying. why it can be art. or poetry. or a calling.  
or disaster within. it calls me out. or disaster. I am called out. or dis-  
aster. I call out. out of turn.

spirit . independence . and one other . it was mild . o  
discovery . o self . o any one . o thee .

---

it was far . faring . far & faring . and that was why we  
went.

---

so then it was a question of context. How do you tun-  
nel up into the context without abandoning language.  
or our now. it was faring. and that was why. why go.  
why we said go. go shrubby. go fishing. go away.  
go gone. go going. go more. go.

where one would have been sent or called and then it did not hold. or  
breathe. After that, stuttering. And the stuttering was necessary. a  
nursery. a nursery of shrubberies. or fishes. a fishery. a fish hatchery.

But now we are in our old shoes & going. and this going is not finding.  
it fishes. and so we are faring. fare thee and well.

*life alchemy, or, fluid mechanics*

Most recently—since Monday—I've been thinking about this monism  
question. In the shower, a couple of weeks ago, there was a hair—very  
short—like you might shave off your legs—but it seemed to be alive,  
moving, not down with the flow of water, but shifting around languid-  
ly, sometimes seeming to pulse. so then, because of this movement  
independent of the flow of water I decided it was a baby thousand leg-  
ger, and flushed it down the drain.

Monday, in the shower, a longer hair from my head was on the side of the tub, but it moved in a similar way, pulsing and not simply washed down in the flow of water. Then I realized that hair, although inanimate in the way that we define life, has cells and capillary action and that it can absorb flow and currents and expand and contract, and that the water, too, though inanimate, has currents and flows other than just washing down and that its tension and movement can affect something as small as a small hair in different ways than just washing it *down*. So that the hair appeared to be a living creature.

Is this a hair or a bug? Is it living or non-living. Does it move of its own force, its life force, or is it moved by something with force, is it human or inhuman. I make these distinctions daily. I make them with respect to my own body, with respect to rain and wind, with respect to the flowers in my garden, with respect to other people. Or rather, it seems, these distinctions have been made in general. By science, as I know it in a limited way. By theology. By philosophy. And these distinctions, inevitably, come to inhabit and define what I write. poetry.

It's a simple idea in some ways. simplistic, even. unnecessary. it doesn't really seem to deserve explanation. but it bothers. because, really, it's beyond comprehension. in some way. it grounds what we think about language, our bodies, and the differences between our bodies and our languages. in the world around us.

In the world around us, our philosophical and theological beliefs are fashioned by the traditions that have come to us from Christianity, and prior to Christianity, from the Greeks, since Plato. For more than 100 years, now, at least since Nietzsche (and I would say, Darwin), philosophers have been trying to think both before and beyond Christianity and the Greeks. and to think back behind these traditions is difficult. So on the one hand, philosophy since the late 19th century is trying to think about the pre-Socratic Greeks and their writing as the pre-Socratic Greeks might have thought it—before Christianity and before Plato. And on the other hand, they are using Greek thought to think *through* and *past* Christianity to some other way of understanding the world. & its forces.

pulcher, pulchr-  
puddle

pulchr-

cytherea—

wings a blur

and so back to the monad. monism.  
it's not that everything is alive or animate or.—or.—  
it's not anthropological.

anth—  
the stem of the flower, the word  
cut  
not anthropos  
but anthos

—and what—

cut  
so, not that all is one, in unity,  
collapsed back to godhead or deity—

—although the Greek way of understanding  
all force as deos—wind, water, air, sun,  
the huntress, the satyr,  
the goddess of desire—  
aphrodite, cytherea ...  
does not collapse ...

but rather movement, movement irrespective of life, like the movements of wind, water, rocks, the circling of the earth and its magnetic fields, its revolutions, its gravities ... and our catching. we don't move entirely independently of these forces, and yet we aren't entirely dependent, either. we might move with these tensions, or against them, or absorb them, or between them ... eddies ... currents. in fluid mechanics, called turbulent or unsteady flow. and so, also, language.

this way going is where we already have our feet, to where we have already set agoing our bodies agoing in their way, or along. along the way. and that is the pulling or pooling. and in this pulling we are not merely washed away or washed down, but pooled, as awash. so awash without away. or going. awash going. and for that—that pooling or pulling—abandon or abundance, but more like a binding abandon, so then we are abandoning awash. awash.

However, not awash without any distinctions. Quite to the contrary. We are attentive to the distinctions that have previously been arranged for us by our western traditions, the Greek or the Christian. Yet, awash,

await. And thus I said, force or the desire for a future. a certain type of it. await, awash, and this is by language. or it is said to be language. but tunnelling up through that edifice which has been set about us, and then away, awash, going. or pooling. and this pooling in language and in and against the blocky edifice of our traditions, in the pooling of these contexts, we are writing, and writing awash. so then the poetry.

the poetry is not then about newness. Not at all. However, it depends upon all the newnesses that those who have written in the twentieth century have allowed to us. And now, we write out of that newness, into the future. and not without regard to the past.

but it is impossible to desire the future without inhabiting our own bodies, our own traditions, our streets, our cities, our rural farmlands. And this is the pulling/pooling. Force. That constraint or tension, like the tension in a drop of water, or along the surface of a pool, or in its currents. Desire outspreads from these contexts. From our daily lives.

And it—the poetry—is not about newness, though it is about the future. And it is not about the past, although it writes as a part of the past. And to some extent, in that we inhabit our moment, now, we awash aware now, the poetry is now. not new. But only now as with regard to the future. await. not await in passivity. but with expectation. and so I said, force or the desire for a future.

The poetry of the twentieth century has been primarily obsessed with the new, making new out of the past or the present. Whereas we need to be able to account for the present moment and to consider the past as a part of what we are, where we are, awash. And so, we are not simply concerned with being new, but in the tensions between the new and the contexts out of which it writes. in the way in which the new as it has been written in the late 19th and in the 20th centuries, the way in which these formal experiments of the avant-garde would allow us to resist or interrupt or tunnel into those edifices of the past that surround us even now.

so we surround ourselves or we are surrounded, pooled, and the pulling exerts a force that could be said to be new, but is not about newness. Rather, assemblages including the pull of the new, the edifice of the past, the context of the present, these things that have to do with our temporal space, gather force and shift. And in the shift, a tension, like the tension of water, language, our language, awash, washes. so we listen to these movements or shifts, which pervade anything we might say. and that saying comes to be a poetry, or poetries rather—

poetries highly attuned to our cultures, our current moment, our pasts. attuned in order to shift or make shift.

### "boulevard between"

*"The creator in the arts is like all the rest of the people living, he is sensitive to the changes in the way of living and his art is inevitably influenced by the way each generation is living, the way each generation is being educated and the way they move about, all this creates the composition of that generation."*  
—Gertrude Stein

Lisa Jarnot's *Some Other Kind of Mission* is one of a number of books published in 1996 and 1997 that seem to me to make poetry out of a kind of turbulence-model of language, context-laden and yet future. In Jarnot's book, I want to talk about one phrase that shows up on the page named "TWO." Along the lefthand side of this page a list is handwritten six times,

messerschmidts.  
B-17s  
spit fires  
zeros. (japanese)

Then there is a short poem pasted in the middle right of the page, the last three stanzas of which read:

the faith-  
fulness of  
machine gun  
fire—

give  
helen  
back,

or some other  
kind of mission

on the right of the page, really surrounding this short poem, there is a brief handwritten phrase that appears to have been xeroxed multiple times at different magnifications and pasted around the edges of the page:

give  
Helen  
back

(mother fuckers—

This brief sentence is not without context. The context is not contained in the book, but clearly the book evokes the story of Helen and Paris (elsewhere: "Paris fucked Helen fourteen hundred times. There was a war going on"). It doesn't recapitulate the story. It doesn't merely refer to the story, either. It speaks back through the centuries to Paris. It says to Paris and to others, perhaps his fellow-countrymen, "give / Helen / back // (mother fuckers—" It makes a command. The speaker is commanding Paris and the warriors who participated in the abduction. It doesn't speak to Homer. It doesn't evoke the great literature of the Greeks. And yet, with that most late-twentieth-century of expletives, it doesn't really speak in the voice of the Trojans, either. It speaks from now, from here, and it speaks to those who have made us here and now. And it speaks of one of the most influential stories about the abduction of a beautiful woman by a man. It gives a command. It calls Paris and his cohorts out. It commands them to action. It provokes them.

In this way, it tunnels up into the narrative and bursts forth, from within. Not really to destroy that edifice, but to take it up again, now, here, in the 1990s. It makes a demand. It demands accountability for the past and the stories we have told about our past. It demands us, the readers, to account for the place of the past now here as we read in this moment. It demands our return, as well. Circling back through nearly 3,000 years of our literary past, to return to the present, fully attuned to the place of Helen among us. And in that tension—the connections between the story as we were told it so many years ago by Homer, and the present, most popular attitudes towards women and sexuality in the 1990s—in that tension, the poetry of the moment is set awash. It returns to us and demolishes us, not the past. As if "some other kind of mission"—it demolishes us.

Rod Smith's *In Memory of my Theories* was also published in 1996. The third poem, "Sieff," begins:

The focal tendon acrostic moan. The word plunging attribute possible. unfold stem of contraction sif, as at the top and the bottom of.

The context is an infinite interpenetration of figmentary subjectification. The sense in the intense indent is aural. Neck, or, tablet, rays. Atone to the bend it

These lines both describe and enact the poetic movement as it is already underway. The words plunge through many possible attributes; stems unfold, contract, sif; and aural sense intense tones, a-tones, bends. The lines are a focal tendon, an acrostic moan.

The lines also refer to a context: "The context is an infinite interpenetration of figmentary subjectification." At first glance, this sentence seems self-explanatory. In a somewhat mockingly self-conscious jargon-laden way, it seems to talk about the interlacing between context and the self, the mobile relationship between the self, however figmentary, and the context. But this reading fails to watch the workings of context in this context. What is context here? There seems to be no context in the usual sense—no landscape, no narrative direction, no setting, no place, nothing within which or towards which we can refer the action for interpretation.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives two definitions of the word context:

1. The part of a written or spoken statement in which a word or passage at issue occurs; that which leads up to and follows and often specifies the meaning of a particular expression.
2. The circumstances in which a particular event occurs; a situation.

In both cases—context as the text which surrounds, and context as event—the context is that which allows us to make sense of the focus of the text or action at hand. But here is a different definition of context: "the context is an infinite interpenetration of figmentary subjectification." This is not saying that the context and the self are interpenetrable. It says that the context is itself interpenetration. The context is nothing more than movement, the movement of imaginary wordnesses, figmentary subjectifications. The context is the motion.

We can refer back to the derivation of our English word context, again from the *American Heritage*:

Middle English, from Latin, *contextus*, coherence, sequence of words, from the past participle of *textere*, to join together, weave : *com-* together + *texere*, to join, weave, plait.

Accordingly, context is that which sequences. Only, in "Sieff," the sequencing is rather less about joining together in the grammatical or



logical ways to which we are accustomed, than it is about a sequencing that foregrounds sequencing itself. The sequence and movement of the words and sentences, their inappositions, their pulling and putting movements, their disjoints—these make up the context at work, already underway, as it bends, tones, shifts, conjoins, contracts, sifts, folds and unfolds, in turbulence.

For example, a couple of pages later, there is an interesting sequence that moves or sifts the pronoun “she”:

wing coup in the job touched. Repugnant Shipbuilding. the fourth letter of. Point also called peroxy radical. She school. She boundary. She written. She stimulus. She clean out. She advantage. She basis. She peoples. She goods. She content. She Islands. She drive. She shoot. She applies. She burner. She kind she multiple she in the working of the shining Switzerland a gentile sheriff shaving lotion and nonfissionable modern chuckle strip the wood boulevard between them.

There are innumerable ways that this stanza could be read. But in the context of this argument, I want to draw attention to the movement of the word or syllable “she.” “She” is a moving target of sorts. Linked or joined here in pairs to a number of words, not all verbs. “She Islands,” for instance, could just be the name of a group of islands, the She Islands. Or, like “She content,” it could be that she islands, like she drives, like she shoots. Is she content, she? Or is the content under scrutiny in this context? Or are “she” and “content” the very disjuncture of content and self from the grammatical norm, where she and content paired in this non-grammatical form without a verb of being are simply discrepant, the discrepant context? In any case, she is not in one place, the she’s multiply here, each two-word sentence skitters off in a different direction, and so the context lopes or stretches out, pushed out past what we would typically understand as a context, all stretched out of shape, until the syllable “she” shimmers into the phoneme sh-, in shining, in sheriff, in shaving, in lotion, in nonfissionable.

And yet, despite all this sift, the very insistence on a certain kind of context, however stretched out of shape, the context built by the very repetition and sifting, the multiple sifting, of she-, this insistence, this context, says something about the ways we use the pronoun she. Now. Today. It says to us. And not unlike (although also tonally quite unlike) Jarnot’s “give Helen back (mother fuckers—,” Smith stretches the context out precisely to ask a question about the “boulevard between” us. Or, as he says immediately following this stanza: “20th comes after changes walls burst. syrupy. opportunities.” This context

opens up a poetry of opportunities, changes. Where she might not be a recognizable subject, instead, a mobile syllable, multiply situated. And the continual sift of the poetry calls us as readers to be attentive to this shifting, and to the specific siting of the words in their contexts. It also asks us to be attentive to the kinds of change that are possible, now, in the 20th century, among us.

In the preface to her *Imagination Verses*, Jennifer Moxley writes about the relationship between the possible, the future, and poetry. Our imagination of what is possible, she writes, whether for society, for life, or for poetry, is “by its very nature unequal.” She writes, “when we hope for a future different from the present we uncover the injustice of our imagination.”

What does this injustice mean? That’s the difficult question. What would it mean for imagination to be unjust, or unequal? What would it mean for our imagination, in its very futurity, to be unjust?

According to Moxley, this inequality demands compromise, in that our daily lives are never equal to the task of the future that we might imagine. In the same way, the poem is also limited by the situatedness of our living, in that it is “drawn from the viewpoint, time frame and landscape of a single life.” So that there is a certain disjuncture between the temporal trajectory of the possible or imagined, and the present situatedness of everyday living. That disjuncture, for Moxley, is poetry: “The poem offers a history of and a future for the mind’s prerogative to exist as more than a memory of its mileus. It is a small but necessary intervention, a crucial and critical disjuncture.”

Disjuncture, then, marks the inadequacy of the present to the future. This disjuncture is the injustice of imagination. We have surrounding us the time and space within which we live, and we can only write out of that context. Yet if poetry is to be anything other than recollection in solitude, not merely reifying the edifices of our traditions and memories, if poetry is to be anything other than a history of our pasts, it must imagine a future different from our present. And yet there is no known way into the future. There is no connection between the present and the future, because the future is always yet to come. And thus, the injustice, the disjunction which is poetry, as Moxley says, “a bridge of half measures on the way to the possible.”

Moxley’s poetry is, then, a poetry of disjuncture, a poetry of imagination. But imagination here is redefined. It is not the imagination of the

romantics, whose poetry was a recollection in solitude, an imagination of memory. It is, instead, an imagination of the unknowable future.

"Duet #1 Wordsworth" is made up of just such disjuncture. The first of two stanzas reads:

Seal my fits with grey immortality,  
and reaper slumber among the ruined  
world ways, beauteous Lucy, much the yew  
trees surprised us of the solitary  
resolution of mutability.  
Lonely she dwelt in independence too,  
up my cottage strange passion leaps as few  
men wandered by traveled Tintern Abbey.

At one level, this poem works as a pastiche of the titles of Wordsworth's poems. Just glancing at the Riverside *Selected Poems I* found all but a very few of these words in the "Table of Contents." At another level, the situatedness or context out of which this poem works, Wordsworth's poetry, allows us to read it as an intervention, an imagined future different from our present.

"Duet" could be read through any number of Wordsworth's poems, but I'm particularly interested in "The Excursion: Book One — The Wanderer." As the headnote summarizes: "The Author reaches a ruined cottage upon a Common, and there meets with a revered Friend, the Wanderer, ... [who] relates the History of its last Inhabitant." The last inhabitant of the cottage was a woman named Margaret, whose husband, once an industrious weaver, succumbs to economic pressures and deserts her. The Wanderer circles throughout the countryside, visiting Margaret periodically.

Initially, she is described as "One whose stock / Of virtues bloomed beneath this lowly roof" (511-12). And after her husband's departure, the increasing disorderliness of her family is described primarily in terms of her house and her garden. The second time the Wanderer visits her after her husband's departure, he comments that her garden had "lost its pride of neatness. Daisy-flowers and thrift / Had broken their trim border-lines, and straggled / O'er paths" (721-24). At his third visit, the following spring, he comments that he "once again entering the garden saw, / More plainly still, that poverty and grief / Were now come nearer to her: weeds defaced / The hardened soil, and knots of withered grass" (832-35).

Throughout its long tradition, poetry in the west has often metaphorized the feminine as floral. And, since at least the eighteenth century in England, the country house and formal garden has symbolized orderly family life. So, in this respect, "The Wanderer" is quite commonplace. What is perhaps more interesting, though, is the way that the feminized garden in its very ruin and disorder comes to stand for the narrative's effect on the Wanderer—and, by extension, the poem's effect on the reader. Near the end of the poem, the Wanderer describes the ruined garden where Margaret's spirit sleeps, overgrown with weeds and spear-grass, as "beautiful," and "calm and still." "So still an image of tranquillity, / ... / That what we feel of sorrow and despair / From ruin and from change, and all the grief / That passing shows of Being leave behind, / Appeared an idle dream" (946-52).

Here the timeless tranquillity of the garden grave is posed against the ruinous changes of time. The reader's anticipated sorrowful response to death and change is said to seem "an idle dream." So change, as a function of time and imagination, brings only ruin, despair and sorrow, while the contemplation of a timeless feminine nature can work against this ruinous change and its attendant grief.

Now, returning to Moxley's poem after this excursion, we can see several ways in which "Duet #1" torques Wordsworth's words, imagining change. First of all, the first-person speaker, the poet, is ambiguous: is Wordsworth, is Moxley, is both, a duet? So that already, in the speaker's initial invocation of Lucy—"Seal my fits with grey immortality, ... beauteous Lucy"—the poet's relation to the feminine muse is shifted. Secondly, the feminine that is invoked is not beauteous and dead, she is beauteous and independent: "Lonely she dwelt in independence too." And thirdly, the relationships between humans, the world, ideas and time are all shifted. Immortality is grey, the reapers slumber, the yew trees surprise, resolution is a resolution of mutability, and the cottage is not surrounded by the natural world—whether orderly or disorderly—it is overgrown with strange passion. These shifts are produced by grammatical and poetic disjunctions. And they speak, not of a ruinous change, but of openness to change, to mutability, to disjuncture.

Robert Fitterman's *Metropolis (1-15)*, forthcoming from Sun & Moon, also situates its language in multiple disjunctive contexts. Like the other books under discussion here, it is not really possible to do it justice in the space available. A number of the poems would make for a valuable discussion: "6," which reproduces excerpts of newspapers with all but a few words and phrases blacked or crossed out; "7," a

description of car lots in Queens in July; "10," a table of contents and summary headnotes to a book entitled "The State of Things Called Recent;" "12"—"Living Under The Letter F," which includes the stanza:

llfffff

fiff

(ff ee

But for the purposes of this essay, I turn to "15," which is drawn from Washington Irving's *A History of New York*. The first lines read:

PlaCID Gibbett IsLand  
BillOWs, thrONGed  
the laTe beauTEous prosPECT 'prenTices

FANcy YouRseLf O reaDer!

a pasSion for cleaNliness—the leading PRinciple  
in DOMestic EcoNomy

Immediately, we know this language is quoted. Words like placid, billows, thronged, beauteous prospect, are not commonly used at this end of the century, and the direct address to the reader is quite old-fashioned in diction. We also know that elements are probably juxtaposed in new ways: the line "the laTe beauTEous prosPECT 'prenTices" seems to be made up of at least two separate elements from Irving's text, since "apprentices," even when used as a verb, usually refers to a person, not a horizon.

But this poem opens up its source in another interesting way, somewhat differently than the poems discussed above. The source here doesn't operate as a context for the poem. Instead, the poem pulls Irving's words and phrases into its context, the late twentieth-century context of the poem *Metropolis*. And in this context, *A History of New York* takes on new meanings.

For instance, it is fairly obvious that the following lines are not excerpted innocently:

EveRY man shouLd be aLLOWed  
quiETly to inHerit His faTHER's HAT

Bouwery, or country seat,  
in patRIArchal retirement

It's just not possible, in 1996, to use the word patriarchal uncritically. Reading backwards from its use, then, we could also question the claim that "EveRY man shouLd be aLLOWed / quiETly to inHerit His faTHER's" ... his father's hat? Wait. "HAT / Bouwery, or country seat."

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, bouwery, now spelled bowery, is derived from the Dutch *bouwerij*, farm, estate, from *bouwen*, to cultivate. It is defined as "a farm or plantation owned by one of the early Dutch settlers of New York." There is also an older English word bower, bowery, which in poetic diction refers to "a rustic cottage, a country retreat." Then there is the Bowery, which is defined: "A street and section of lower Manhattan, New York City, frequented by derelicts. [From BOWERY (originally Peter Stuyvesant's estate).]" Of course today's Bowery—a hipster haven—cannot be avoided in this line. All of these senses are operative, and, the insertion of the word "hat" and the contemporary Bowery into a sentence about the inheritance of property pulls that sentence, rudely, into the present day.

However, Fitterman is not merely interested in pointing out disparities between present day New York and the bucolic tranquility of the early town. The citations seem chosen just as much for their over-the-top rhetoric as for their descriptive value. So that it becomes impossible to separate the role of a historian of the city from that of the public poet. Or, as the poem says:

the high-minded Pieter de Groodt  
shoWder down a panNier Load of beneDictionS—

the Long Pipes—

Manhattoes—

garriSoned bY a douGhtY  
host of oRaTors

The text here comes to incorporate Fitterman himself, includes us and



our own "high-minder" "panNler Load." This kind of turn folds the source text onto the poem in such a way as to resist any attempt to produce a critical reading of the source text. Poem "13" gives us another index of this resistance to a simplistic distinction between source text, poetic text and context in Metropolis:

When does the quote stop  
Qhen doth thus quote stopeth  
vis-a-vis a congolem stripped  
overcoat of the obvious yearning a  
pith & gin rickey yesteryear—  
...  
Things are scarier than  
the rear-view redundancy under  
sun lamp, reappears the mood  
ring of safety, the profit in loneliness,  
...  
cries mistrial likely  
judged from the past.

Here, the attempt to judge the past is more of a mistrial—"invalid because of a basic error in procedure" (*AH Dictionary*). We can't simply look back at, judge and therefore differentiate ourselves from the past. "Things are scarier than / the rear-view." Rather, the error in procedure is assuming that we know when the quote stops. In the way that everyday or contemporary objects like a hat, the Bowery, congolem, mood ring, sun lamp, and gin rickey invade these poems—in a similar way, our language, our assumptions, and our present are incessantly invaded by the past. There is no easy differentiation of our present from our pasts. And, by extension—to return to our discussion of the future—our imagination of the possible cannot escape our contexts, our traditions, our rootedness, the edifices that surround us. In fact, we are just as likely to be "judged from the past." As Fitterman cites, folding the text back onto us: "FANcy YouRself O reaDer!"

And so I said tunnel up, into. If our present and pasts, like an Alcatraz, are inescapable and in a certain sense indestructible, we still have the advantage of the uncreated future. In scientific usage, an experiment is a test of what we do not know against the physical properties of the world. An experiment does not create new matter, it creates new knowledge. It does not change the physical world, it changes the boundaries of our interactions with the world. It does not discover new worlds, it discovers us differently. It changes what we can do. Perhaps we can think of innovation in language in this manner, so that innova-

tive poetry now, here in the late 1990s, would not subscribe to the slogan, "make it new." Instead, it would ask questions: What is it we do not know? How do we pay attention to the world as we have inherited it, in order to make shift? To ask this is to think the relations between language and the world differently.

The discussion in all of these books broadens out to larger issues of the social and poetry. But perhaps the most insistent about such issues is Juliana Spahr's *Response*. The initial poem "Responding," takes up the question of the relations between art and nation, the social and the person. As it begins: "This is a place without a terrain a government that always / changes an unstable language."

Section II reads:

realism's authenticities are not the question

the question [role of art in the State

...

we know [name of major historical figure] calls, authentically,  
for a more total, more radical war than we can even  
dream in the language of the avant-garde

we know a commercial promises to reduce plaque more  
effectively in this same tone

Here, war is called for, the avant-garde dreams, and commerce promises, all in the same language. Each of these language-uses claim sole authenticity. But how do we fashion an art, a language use, that does not abandon promise, dreams, radicality—and yet is somehow distinguishable from the claims of nation and its attendant war, or the claims of commerce?

"We can't," Spahr writes, "keep our fingers of connection out of it." And so, one response, and a necessary response, it seems, is precisely to draw the connections between art, nation, war, commerce, culture. Our art, our language, is situated within these bounds. Yet, at the same time, it is possible to differentiate: "rewritten, the goal of the artist is to prevent reality in a true and / concrete manner."

How does one, the poet, "prevent reality?" The word "prevent" here



seems to mean multiply. At one level, it means to keep something from happening, to stop an action already underway. That is resistance. But the older meaning of prevent, closer to the Latin original *praevenire*, “to come before, anticipate,” is also operative here. The artist precedes reality, in her attention to the future. That is the experiment. It represents the positive valence of our work.

#### graphic body, or, the albatross

I have been arguing for—attempts to demonstrate—a common attunement to context and its languages among these poets. I think this commonality extends to a wider range of poets writing today. This writing attends to specific uses of language in our culture, both present and past—the use of the story of Helen, the pronoun she, the ways we talk about death and time, our historical reference points for the development of urban space, the inheritance of property, the language of commercials, the language of war. The poetry does not just resist these uses, or abstract itself from them. It situates its own poetic languages with regard to these specific language sites. It constitutes itself in tension with them, within their bounds, and then ... Then it shifts.

This kind of language use, a poetry that “prevents reality,” depends on a very material notion of language—language as that which moves and has consequences in our world, a bodily language, a language constituted within or bound up with our bodies; thus, a multiple and varied language—languages, I should say. Languages as varied as our bodies, our histories, our presents, our futures. Languages that catch us up in their turbulent flow.

Mark Wallace, in the recent *Shadows*, writes:

There is no such thing as language. There are words and their histories, there are contexts, structures, ways of speaking, languages that often contest or merge with each other, a boisterous and fragile multiplicity. But there is no monolithic center which the word “language” could mean. There are certainly, in differing contexts, languages with different kinds of (though always changing) power.

Wallace here speaks of language formations—languages and their contexts. Since we cannot assume a monologic language, he says, we find ourselves having to situate our poetry in multiple and in specific ways. We ourselves are bound up in these contexts. We cannot cut ourselves out of the text; we bring our bodies, our lives, our cities, our societies,

our histories, the composition of our generation, to our poetries.

“Such words”—the words we write from within these contexts, Wallace goes on to say—“resist other meanings (and the powers supported by those meanings) that they find intolerable or offensive, but always as part of the changes they create and are” [my emphasis]. The words are caught up in the very tensions and flows that they describe. As are we. And our potential for change depends upon our openness to this catching, this pulling or pooling. And so we return to the question of change: force or the desire for a future.

In her “Responding,” Spahr refers to various kinds of language use by writers:

[generic pronoun] painted on houses, streets, stones, trees

[generic pronoun] covered [name of island] with strange marks  
in chalk, oil paint, and dye

[generic pronoun] wished to reduce writing to the zero level  
where it is without meaning. When culture invades  
private life on a large scale [generic pronoun] said the  
individual cannot escape being raped

another [generic noun] made a font that was scratched into  
paper by a knife

this font made each letter into a single scratch

These statements are all instances of writing being etched onto the physical world, or onto the body, or onto paper. These statements all describe a certain kind of physical force, a language use that resists the forces that impinge upon people. They describe a kind of embattled war in the trenches—the force of language against the forces of the world.

But Spahr’s poetry enacts a different kind of force—it allows for trajectories elsewhere, turbulence, flow. It does not just name a resistance to immovable forces; instead, it enacts the potential of language to do more than we can think. Between brackets. The subjects of this poem: “[generic pronoun],” “[generic noun],” remain potential. The brackets allow for a different future, they prevent reality by shifting the terms—literally—of the material body of language away from a male or a female subject. They bracket gender, and the gendered body, in lan-

guage, while opening up the highly volatile topic of rape; and the bracketing, of course, foregrounds the question in its space. Who wished, who said, who did these things, we wonder. Was it a man or a woman? We want to put a pronoun in the space allotted for it. We struggle to read these statements without the signposts we are used to. The very shift gives us pause.

In the space of the pause, where our attention catches, if only momentarily, in each phrase, on that which is bracketed. In that skip, in that shift, there, there, the future. And its possibility hinges on the way that gender, the gendered pronoun, is attended to, made or make shift.

In similar ways, I would argue, the strange capitalization and discordant temporality of Fitterman's text, the disjunctive grammar and odd juxtaposition of Moxley's uses of Wordsworth's poetic language, the discrepant uses of the pronoun she in Smith's "Sieff," and Jarrot's urgent rereading of Homer, "give Helen back (mother fuckers)"—each of these strategies foregrounds the materiality of the text, attuned to the operations of language in each specific context. In each of these instances, our usual attitudes towards the formations of gender in language are shifted, if only momentarily. At each lurch giving us pause, making us aware of language uses we so often take for granted, uses such as the automatic assignment of "she," "he" and "it" in our everyday speech, with all the assumptions attendant on the ideas of masculinity or femininity.

These are the kinds of experiments undertaken by these books. Experiments not on language *per se*, but with the ways that we use words—words and their tensions with our world, social and physical.

Some of the oldest myths of our culture—myths of how the world was formed out of chaos; myths of how God was, in the beginning before time, the Word; myths of how and why male and female humans, animals, and plants were created—these myths rely on a certain definition of humanity and its relationships with language and the world. Our very notion of a letter (the letter l, or the letter a), our very concept of Word, are already pervaded by western and Christian notions of body, of the material world, of the priority of spiritual or intellectual being over the body in the world.

So that, for instance, a single letter or a single sound is thought to be without meaning, while the Word is weighty. And in this way, the physical presence of language, either in written or spoken form, is not

thought of as the thing that carries meaning. Meaning is said to be extraneous to form—given from without, from God.

These kinds of baggage have tended to be invisible in our culture. Invisible and weighty and in some ways inescapable. And yet, if we are to imagine a future different from our own present, we have to risk this baggage. By that I mean that even as we carry around and within us our skeletons, our bodies, our histories, our property, our poetics, we also risk being carried. away. in the current. awash. as I have said, going, going and not finding, ferrying the possible ... desire ... the future ... carrying with us what is possible to say. and so saying. in that turbulence. we. make. shift.

#### Books Discussed:

Robert Fitterman, *Metropolis (1-15)*, Sun & Moon, forthcoming.

Lisa Jarrot, *Some Other Kind of Mission*, Burning Deck, 1996.

Jennifer Moxley, *Imagination Verses*, Tender Buttons, 1996.

Rod Smith, *In Memory of My Theories*, O Books, 1996.

Julianne Spahr, *Response*, Sun & Moon, 1996.

Mark Wallace (with Jefferson Hansen), *Shadows: New & Selected Dialogues on Poetics*, Poetic Briefs 22&23, 1997.

## Contributors' Notes

**Sherry Brennan** lives in State College, PA. Her recent chapbook *Taken* is published by primitive publications. She has recent work in *Mass Ave.*, *Situations*, *Nedge*, and forthcoming in *No Roses Review*.

**David Buuck** lives in San Francisco, and has published work and criticism in *PoMo*, *h2o4*, *stiltz*, and *Research in African Literatures*.

**Carolyn Castaño** was born in Hollywood in 1971. She has studied at the San Francisco Art Institute and the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture. She has exhibited her work throughout San Francisco, most recently at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. She holds many odd jobs, the most satisfying of which is teaching art to high school students.

**Sarah Anne Cox** lives in San Francisco. Her work has appeared in *14 Hills*, *Rooms*, and is due out this spring in *Five Fingers Review* and *Outlet*. *Home of Grammar*, a limited edition chapbook, is available from Double Lucy Press.

**Tim Davis** clambers around. He is a poet, photographer, banjoist, Assistant Editor at New Directions, and author of *My Life in Politics* or *A History of N=A=R=R=A=T=I=V=E Film* (Object Editions/Poetscoop) and *The Analogy Guild* (Arras Press). He can't stand the FLASH RAY!

**Noah de Lissovoy's** poetry has recently appeared in *Apex of the M*, *Talisman*, *Proliferation*, *Ribot*, *The Washington Review*, *Situation* and *Mirage/Period(ical)*. He has work forthcoming in *Big Allis*, *Lyric&*, and *Remap*. A selection of his work will be included in the anthology *Tense Present*, edited by Rodrigo Toscano and Pasquale Verdichio, as well as in the next Gertrude Stein Awards in *Innovative American Poetry* (Sun & Moon).

**Robert Hale** attended Sarah Lawrence College and the New School for Social Research. His poetry and book reviews have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Sulfur*, *The World*, *Proliferation*, *The Impercipient*, *Antonym*, *Object* and numerous other publications. He is also the founder and producer of Golden Books, which recently published chapbooks by Jordan Davis and Samuel Truitt.

**Molly Hankwitz** teaches writing privately and is in the process of creating new works of feminist and philosophical fiction. Her career as a visual artist and writer has taken her in many directions, from criticism to film, poetry and performance. She lives in San Francisco.

**Tan Lin** teaches English and poetry at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. *Lotion Bulbhead Giraffe* was published by Sun & Moon. A new book, entitled *BOX*, is forthcoming, also from Sun & Moon.

**Dana Lomax** lives in Pacifica where she bodyboards. She is the producer of the experimental collaborative project Link. Her work has appeared in *The Bay Guardian*, *Coracle*, and *blue line*. She is currently the artist in residence at Kollage Community School for the Arts where she teaches poetry.

**Yedda Morrison** lives in San Francisco. Her *Knife, Fork, and Spoon (A Book of Etiquette)*, is forthcoming from Double Lucy Press.

**Elizabeth Robinson** lives in Berkeley with her spouse and two sons. She is currently struggling to complete an M.A. in bioethics at Pacific School of Religion. Books include *In the Sequence of Falling Things* and *Bed of Lists* (Kelsey St.). Recent work has appeared or will appear in *Epoch Magazine*, *Rooms*, *Antonym*, and a re:chapbook.

**Michelle Rollman** is a San Francisco-based artist currently on hiatus in sunny New York City. Her work has been shown at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and New Langton Arts in San Francisco, The Threadwaxing Space in New York, and the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. She is represented by Gallery Paule Anglim in San Francisco.

**Sarah Rosenthal's** poetry has appeared in *Rooms*, *14 Hills*, *Transfer*, *Stiltz*, and *Land of Extremes*. She is a member of Dish, an experimental performance collaborative. As an editor at the online magazine *CitySearch* ([www.citysearch.com](http://www.citysearch.com)) she writes a monthly poetry feature called "Local Howlers." She is working on her MFA in poetry at San Francisco State University, where she also teaches creative writing.

**Jocelyn Sainenberg's** work has appeared in several journals, including *Arshile*, *Mirage #4 Period(ical)*, and *Superflux*. Her first book *Mortal City* (Parentheses Writing Series) is forthcoming this spring. She teaches English composition at San Francisco State University.

**Kathy Lou Schultz** is the author of *Re dress* (San Francisco State University) which won the Michael Rubin Poetry Award. Her work has also appeared in *Mirage* and *The New Fuck You: Adventures in Lesbian Reading* (Semiotex(e)). In addition to her full-time job as a copy editor, she edits *Lipstick Eleven*, a new national literary magazine, and *SWEAT: International Labor Magazine of North America*.

**Eleni Sikelianos** was the recipient of a 1995 NEA Fellowship, and a Gertrude Stein Award in Innovative American Poetry. Recently out is *The Book of Tendons* from Post-Apollo Press.

**Brian Strang** lives in San Francisco and teaches composition at San Francisco State University. Recent critical writing appeared in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*. He has poetry forthcoming in *Rhizome* and *Syntactics*. More selections of *Record*, a collaboration with Jocelyn Saidenberg, can be seen in *Fourteen Hills*.

**Rodrigo Toscano** lives in San Francisco. He is the author of *The Disparities* (Sun & Moon).

**Elizabeth Treadwell** holds a BA in Native American Studies from the University of California at Berkeley and an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Her novel *Eleanor Ramsey: the Queen of Cups* was published by SFSU as the winner of the 1997 Michael Rubin Award. *Populace*, her collection of prose poems, stories, and poetry, is forthcoming from Avec Books. She teaches Composition at Ohlone College and is founding editor of Double Lucy Books, publisher of limited edition chapbooks, and *Outlet*, a periodical.

**Mark Wallace** is the author of a number of books of poetry, most recently *Nothing Happened and Besides I Wasn't There* (Edge Books) and *Sonnets of a Penny-a-Liner* (Buck Downs Books). He is the co-editor of the essay collection, *A Poetics of Criticism* (Leave Books). He currently lives in Washington, D.C., where he edits the poetry magazine *Situation* and runs the Ruthless Grip Art Project Poetry Reading Series.



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