



# TRIPWIRE 10



# TRIPWIRE 10

fuck the barn  
fuck the rancher and his barbed wire  
shake and shake and shake and shake  
shake until memory of the saddle is off

CACONRAD

OAKLAND : 2016



TRIPWIRE  
a journal of poetics

editor: David Buuck  
assistant editor, design & layout: Cassandra Smith  
editorial assistant: Lara Durbach  
co-founding editor: Yedda Morrison

cover image: Yuh-Shioh Wong, "Castle Camouflaged by the Rose." Courtesy of the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

thanks to: CAConrad, the editors of *Entropy*, Adriana Garriga-Lopez, Rob Halpern, and all the contributors.

Tripwire was founded by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck in 1997, and published six issues from 1998-2002, plus a pamphlet in 2004. Back issues are available at <http://tripwirejournal.com>.

Submissions: please send proposals or inquiries to [tripwirejournal@gmail.com](mailto:tripwirejournal@gmail.com). Looking for essays, reviews, interviews, translations, black and white visual art, etc. No unsolicited poetry, plays or fiction, please.

Tripwire Translation Microgrants:  
The Tripwire Microgrants for Translation are designed to provide support and recognition for translators of contemporary avant-garde and experimental writing. Each time donations to the fund reach \$100, that amount will be awarded to a translator for work published in coming issues of Tripwire.  
Go to <http://tripwirejournal.com/tripwire-microgrants-for-translation> to donate.

printed by Bookmobile  
distributed by Small Press Distribution ([spdbooks.org](http://spdbooks.org))  
all rights revert to contributors upon publication.

ISSN: 1099-2170  
[tripwirejournal.com](http://tripwirejournal.com)



## TRIPWIRE 10

Danielle LaFrance	5
Juliana Spahr	10
Lila Matsumoto & Samantha Walton	13
Sarah Hayden	17
Nibia Pastrana Santiago	24
Frances Kruk	36
Sheila Mannix	40

---

A Pestschrift for CAConrad	45
with an interview, prose, poems, & a play by CAConrad, plus TC Tolbert * Magdalena Zurawski * Frank Sherlock * Anne Boyer * Marianne Morris * Allison Cobb * Jen Coleman * d/wolach & Elizabeth Williamson * erica kaufman * Thom Donovan	

---

Jennifer K Wofford	168
Alicia Cohen	174
César Moro (trans. Esteban A. Quispe)	188
Heriberto Yépez	193
ko ko thett	201
Steven Farmer	205
Nachoem M. Wijnberg (trans. David Colmer)	212
Ghayath Almadhoun (trans. Catherine Cobham)	216
Bert Stabler	222

---

## Reviews

Julian Francis Park on Claudia Rankine & Fred Moten	231
Tyrone Williams on Jocelyn Saidenberg	257
erica kaufman on Frank Sherlock	263
Eric Sneathen on Chris Nealon	269
William Rowe on Joshua Clover	274



Danny Hayward on Lucy Beynon & Lisa Jeschke	280
David W. Pritchard on Marie Buck	294
Kristin Palm on Wendy Walters	300
Linda Russo on Lorine Niedecker	303
James Sherry on Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge	322
Laura Moriarty on Syd Staiti	327
Nich Malone on <i>Towards. Some. Air.</i> , eds. De'Ath & Wah	329
Ryan Gato on P. Inman	334

---

Contributor Notes	342
-------------------	-----



## DANIELLE LAFRANCE

### Today Gives a Fuck

If a fungus appears, scrub harder.  
If the reading condescends suck it, babies.

Too long the book is too long she should have written a shorter book. A  
book it's too long it should have written a too the book is shorter she  
Is shorter.

I'm about to bleed survival strategies. After I reach third bASS with the men  
of Bach.  
Because all women do is confess.

Breathe. Zest. Shit.

Is indistinguishable from form. At this rate, a boring lyric is better than  
men.

Not you. The other men. The ones in the back, no the front. I'm not talking  
about you.  
I'm talking about the good men.  
Now put your mouth where your mouth is.



Ass fungus infects deeper. Nail butter spreads down.  
The answer is germinating in the question. It hurts to want something less  
than democracy.

Malamata flamamata. In solidarity, in hate, we love each other. *This* is how  
we fake the détournement of our social structures.

Where is the sunny girl? Do not write, Cixous. For death is a silent hook-  
up.

I can't wait to see you again. Why trouble me with waits?  
Loosy-goosy fucking keeps us up all night. Panties in the doghouse.

I wish to be alone and talk to no one. Except with you, no, not with you.



Convince me your annoying habits taste of salty chips. Fried gum.

Write one thing express another. I never see myself. Only in the reflection of a city on fire.

Fecundity panic, now goner. For a long time the poem was a cipher. Cloaked, gritted classes.

Jeans that make our poems look fantastic.

I want to copy everything you write. I want capitalist poetics. Poetics of revulsion, of violence.

I don't want to like anything or think things are good until.

You are beholden to it. It grows. You are its beneficiary. You are grateful for moments when it subsides.

It's already your life, you're projects and wrecks.

Lubricant. And yet, a kiss ingratiates such blood-sister transfusions. I'll play the part of the traveling hotel instead of a chivalrous goat.

Fucking is a parody of caring. There are infections that come with it, but the

Fuck cunt.



You lock.

An anonymous friend enters the anonymous bookstore. Your speech wavers, your eyes glossy. You break down. An anonymous friend witnesses the exact moment where your private feelings are exposed in public, and escorts you into the back room. Later tonight, this intuitive friend tells you: when emotions are expressed in public, no longer contained in the enclave of the mind, the house, the seriousness of the situation is revealed and made visible.

You were jealous: notice me too.  
Talking pants off, slow ride or sputter.  
It's not personal, but

Everything you hand in is your own caca.

Helene Demuth to the Brotherhood of the Traveling Marxists:  
Sometimes you need to make a mess.

I am pregnant.



I had an abortion.

Provisional health makes small steps, puke trail demonology. At the bar, this might sound crazy, etc. But here, etc.

I must confess that the itch is contagious. Audience dental damnation.

Frigid, you cannot sleep with all these noises. Stop thinking, Sartre.

When I say, not, no, not like that, not the word, that's not the right word.

Sitting with the loss of the word requires a supple religion, which I reject, as I prefer not to be strangled.

Bungico Umbilicus.

If I want to cry, I'll move to the left. No, your left. What's left?

It is remarkable to remember your genitals are more than a penis. Even yours, etc.

Denounce me, like Moses to the Golden Calf.

It is a critical time to dress for battle, not ear-candling.

It is imperative to discard social safety, like marriage.

Desperate moments call for triteness. A list of things you and I will never do together.

It's as easy as sharing a disgust for green washing and seal beating.

Autosarcophy. I have eaten myself and still cannot finish the job.

Is this girly-girl stupid?

"If I'm not a feminist, can I still be saved?"

If I'm a hot knife, you're a pound of fat white butter.

I'm not talking about you, dick-face. No, not your dick, the one in my back.



## JULIANA SPAHR

An Agatha, for Anne Boyer

(written by Juliana Spahr but in debt to Cassandra Gillig)

It's a story we all know. She was right fair, noble of body and of heart, and was rich of goods. And yet she lived near a provost, a provost of a low lineage, who was lecherous, avaricious, and a miscreant and paynim. His lowness ranged from rape to belittlement, and for to accomplish his evil desires fleshly, and to have riches, did do take her to be presented and brought tofore him, and began to behold her with a lecherous sight for she looked pretty when she smiled and she should smile more so he said. Then began a series of events to get her to consent to his will and to smile more. Some did do put her in a dark prison. Some did do a keg stand in her name. Others did her to be tormented in her breasts and paps, and commanded that her breasts and mammals should be drawn and cut off. Some read Mark Strand RIP to her. Some did do put her back in a dark prison with no food and no medicines. It is said that she went gladly. That she said your words be but wind, your promises be but rain, and your poems be as rivers that pass, and how well that all these things hurtle at the foundement of my courage, yet for that it shall not move. That she said Over felon and cruel tyrant, hast thou no shame to cut off that in a woman which thou didst suck in thy mother, and whereof thou



wert nourished? But I have my paps whole in my soul, of which I nourish all my wits. And yet she healed and when the provost realized she was healed he made her, all naked, to be rolled upon burning brands. And it was then that the ground began to tremble from an earthquake and a part of a wall fell down. So the people came running unto the house of the provost, saying, in a great bruit, that the city was in a great peril for the torments and commanded that she should be remised in prison. And then he didn't listen and so they then sacrificed a goat in the same of Satan and then a police officer in the name of Anne Boyer. And then great many did do the putting on of a robber outfit, smashing window after window of the provost's office, hopping in and out, delicately, grabbing what they could. Smoke bombs and roman candles filled the air. There were more kegstands. There was a long line. All for Anne. Others castrating, choosing at random. Some asked for volunteers, some volunteered. Many rigged some shit so they were connected to wires and flew around Peter Pan style, screeching. Many had a loaded gun, safety off, in their hand the entire time. I am supposed to shotgun a beer here and then tase David Buuck while Stephanie Young shaves every man that still has hair with a shitty bic razor, the dull one I used earlier in the day to shave my legs, underarms, the edges of my bush, especially the front lower bottom, next to my cunt hole which I try to keep trim for the same reasons that I try to smile more when I am around men and the provost. I am to do forced



bloodletting of all the men here until they pass out and then make them drink the blood to revive. Then I am to say in the name of St Agatha fuck voting, fuck the idea of cameras on cops mattering. And in the name of Anne Boyer, all marriages and all couple forms. Gun control too. And that Ferguson hug photo. And so when Agatha comes out of the prison she will do join her hands, do hold them heavenward, and do say in praying: Stand on the bar, stomp your feet, start clapping / Got a real good feeling something bad about to happen / Drinks keep coming, throw my head back laughing / Wake up in the morning' don't know what happened / Whoa... Something bad / Whoa... Something bad. And after that for to prove that she has done prayed for the salvation of the country, there will yet come at the beginning of February, the year after her martyrdom, a great fire, coming from the mountain toward the city to burnt the earth and stones, it will be so fervent.



## LILA MATSUMOTO & SAMANTHA WALTON

### Checklist: Your Privilege

Or, Minority Poets Tell All — and it's bad

Is your door sufficiently wide to let our wide faces through?

Have you considered the extraordinary strength it takes to support these heads, will you massage our necks?

Have the last three hundred men you've invited to read been interspersed with a woman, at least in blocks?

Have you ever looked around and thought sociologically, this is a bit of a TOTAL sausagefest?

Do you need us to explain what systemic means? Have you thought about installing a loo?

When you do things like write comic raps attributed to women rappers you've invented to parody successful slam figures like Kate Tempest, do you title these mock raps things like Quantum Slut?

What do you think of this sentiment 'Fuck capitalism in every hole in which it has fucked us'?

Which holes have you been fucked in, can you be more specific?

Is your idea of critical discourse seven men in their fifties with Oxbridge degrees in seven different libraries in the



South East trying to make the link between Ctrl C and Ctrl V?

Was your lecture on postmodernism, when you said that it 'evokes ideas of irony, disruption, parody and simulation', an allegory of your frequent mansplaining?

Are you using your night as an opportunity to promote your latest pamphlet, a block text screenprint small press masterpiece entitled CALLED OUT: the radical accumulation of man feelings and hurt debt in the global community of embodied h8rs?

Do you think that your pathos and self-awareness, sensitively detailed in your best-selling books *Pathetic Bookish Men* and *Vulnerability*, consisting of screeds of your male protagonists' millennial loneliness in the posthumanist landscape punctuated by feelings of anger and general guilt over the sorry state of liberal politics and rampant inequality, authorize predatory behaviour?

Have you confused one of the only two female poets in the room with the other one, in which case have you ever been confused with every other white man, as you are so many?

Have you confused one of the only two Asian poets in the room with the other one? Do you really think we can patch things up over a few of your Arts Council-funded beers?

Do you think that poetry is a big emotional experience that validates privilege?



Are you feeling vulnerable tonight? Do you want to tell me about it? Are you willing to receive an invoice for my time?

Do you write formidable poems about stones and savaged birds' nests, and empty houses where imaginary brothers you believed were yourself had died grisly ritual deaths? And when you're no longer able to write a line, you've substituted writing poetry with getting drunk and convincing your students how vital poetry is by seducing them in its name? Is this a failure on your part to remain 'intellectually pliant'? Does being aware and really sorry about it make it ok?

Is your magazine called Squid Fuck? Is your magazine called Sticky Stick? Is your magazine called Cunt Pedestrian? Is your chapbook called Inca Fuck Boy? Are your emails apologising for kneejerk misogyny and defence of rape culture like a 1000 pages long, are you thinking of circulating them as an open letter to the dear world and everyone in it? Would you like me to consider publishing your manuscript, TO FEEL MORE KEENLY: why broets matter (a series of aggressively unpunctuated prose poems in which the bodies of passive women are violated by the speaker in order for him to fully express his sadness about class and the situation in Palestine)?

Does your artistic statement, to express your personal and political anger through a cross-disciplinary format which challenges Anglo-centric notions of creativity, make allowances for the consistently all-male lineups at your poetry nights, and also your generally pervy nature?



Have you got any ideas about how I could change my name?

Will you politely replace me in your anthology with other broadly comparable representative females?

Do you believe that the laws of sausage no longer reign and that that writing poetry about white male privilege is unduly provocative?



# SARAH HAYDEN

Give us labor and the training which fits for labor! We demand this, not for ourselves alone, but for the race— O.S.  
*for Rachel Warriner*

I

**When first ~~man~~ wandered**

evermoving

we were hearing in stereo

low to the ground

& tight against a concave stretch of sky]

large hands

lit with wet grass//

smaller hands

galvanized on the upsweep//

throwing pollen to the wind//

seeing where it lay

what took

what they gave

tasting

every

thing

caressively

caressively

[in dark:

always stopping

to crush & then

#to add liquid/

to dessicate (under sun)

to heat (with fire)

to leave out (under stars)

sedges, grasses and wildflowers



to dilute (with what else we know)

myriapodic      hot pistons/  
unprickable pads      all unceasing

but laying down to get grassprinted

just once      just once  
waking      seeing

as:

[it crosses zones in a wet white bag  
is drowning for an instant  
sucks a world's worth of the dizzy stuff  
snorkels it

is rawly still    awhile      //cut down from above a rocking throne//      crumpled at the end of its string  
is in/out/between  
the now and the fading familiar      (which, in drying, is becoming already air borne; calling wings)

itself

against its own  
weak neck  
finds      it is found  
finds it familiar  
finds      it is

propelled

from above  
" an earlier sea—self  
" amphibious existence to its  
immediate gelatinous destiny— its



debut extant

and then there was a cloud and *nothing*

]

>quiet air in\_\_\_noisy air out>>

new light/cooled feet/we resume  
& so replunging

now more surely  
story)

(this, your {pl.} pattern recognition success

now to #

& to

present to our mouth and to *the mouths of others*

(buds proliferating

the rural electrification of new territories)

& so holding and so keeping and so remembering

pod

root

tender stem

flesh:flesh

flower

[mastication: muscular rendition of the transubstantiation of light into colour into motion]

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

**We ceased from our wanderings , and, camping upon one spot of earth, [...] again the labors of life were divided among us.**

walking, sleeping, walking, sleeping, walking, staying, sleeping, staying, starting...



striped silk  
 broad brim  
 starched lace  
 seed pearls  
 bone buttons  
 hooks&eyes  
 wide sash (17 inches deep & holding)  
 rustling skirt  
 sliding sheath  
 nyloned knobs  
 calf conforming

jelly now adamant  
 born into service & making ~~men~~ sing  
 taking the available course  
 sensible only to bipedal embrace/ash galvanic/tobacco cries  
 on  
 on  
 on

purse abulge with pamphlets, she is ready  
 eyes tight-set, ~~she~~ gazes towards the future  
 her hand, white-knuckled, clasps a crooked sword

or ~~she~~ is waiting  
 or ~~she~~ is lost in thought  
 or ~~she~~ is leaning



& now she is jumping & now she is leaping & now she is

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

or —————

low, wet, crumpled, cut down, a ~~woman~~ sings, screams into silence, the ground,  
 ALL STOP.

[... ] **a change came**

DA CAPO (this time with ~~feelings~~)



*?would it not be possible*

someday, on a day not unlike this one, to find oneself, on waking, altogether otherwise, to find presence in absence and absence no longer present [ ] to adopt, then, a bifurcating cladding and swish about no more amid curtains, and, hence forth, throw oneself all entirely into exploring the multitudinous possibilities suddenly then allabout seedling, growing and rounding out, seeing them there ripe for the popping, and seizing them in taloned fists bursting them into being, and then rushing out the street, occasioning thereby no great or unpleasant kerfuffle, what with there being nothing altogether untoward nor backward neither about such a one doing such a thing on such a day. 'o would it not be possible

*How far otherwise might have been the directions*

in which one might have moved, in which one might have taken oneself and others, in which one might have pushed a specific line of conversation, in which one might have compelled a composite body, collectively, to act, not for ourselves but for all who are racing, whether speedily or, being held in out- side by divers concerns fleshly or politic, against the thousand silences of falling clocks, towards a place, hoping there to MAKE HAPPEN things unfamiliar in the world and yet renowned in the ears of those who have been given to consider how things might someday be other than what they are now, or at the hour under discussion. <sup>20</sup> how far otherwise might have been the directions

*it may be that, inexplicable as it seems, some differences still will remain*

*it may also be said that these differences might never be eradicated*

*it may be that with sexes definite and distinct they will always diverge in this*

[THIS SINGLE CIRCUMSTANCE]

how/ever

it may possibly be that, in future ages WE

WILL NO LONGER CARE

the *dividing line*/the *inherent connection*/the *inescitant physical activity*: none of this will pull at our scalps, none of it will prickle our pores/tickle our ~~prayers~~ pray/turs/pray



V

two things the same or almost  
 starting together: moving apart  
 rubbing self from self, resistingly

**sticklebacks wound round with ribbon unwind, slidingly**

or

a single pod, nearsplit with immanence  
 five spheres so proximal as to be inter-dented  
 each alike inthis indignity

**knocking up against each other they are bevelled precious and irreplaceable**

'n't'l

no pair could be formed  
 heaps fall in  
 to-gether  
 to- eachother  
 inevitable and insistent  
 folding

folding and

collapse and collate

divers protuberances assert themselves  
 in & outwardly  
 they clear throats into space and into matter  
 snap crackle & pop  
 squeak  
 liquids bubble  
 strings shiver/ are rosined/ are warmed  
 extend vibrating vectors between points  
 the spider drops with speed from an invisithread of silk  
 the dermis can so very nearly luxé off it  
 ALMOST

bubble &amp;

ALL IS

enough to be bristling



## NIBIA PASTRANA SANTIAGO

*taller de nada*

(workshop on nothing)



presentado en el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico  
mayo-junio 2015  
fotografías por Antonio Ramírez Aponte

presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Puerto Rico  
may-june 2015  
photography by Antonio Ramírez Aponte



## The lazy dancer

**First**, I am going to make an effort to be lazier.

- The lazy dancer has no duty to dance.
  - The lazy dancer does not stand in the way of progress.
  - The lazy dancer is in idle state until desire to dance appears.
  - The lazy dancer does not consider dance as a necessary means to a livelihood.
- 
- For the lazy dancer boredom is risky as it might tempt the dancer to produce something. According to general knowledge a dancer must repeat and exhaust him/her self in order to acquire the desired technique; a dancer must dance in order to have profit. Contrary to these beliefs, the lazy dancer never dances for the sake of something else.
- 
- **In regards to the audience**, the pleasure of audiences has become mainly passive. Audience members are workers too and often tired they fall asleep during performances. Sleeping becomes the device through which they can derive whatever happiness they may enjoy. In this case the lazy dancer should not make any effort to get their attention, and never resort to virtuosity to wake them up.



- **In regards to the choreographer,** if a choreographer preaches about the dignity of the dancer's labor, a lazy dancer should abandon the room. As this emphasis on keeping the dancer happy is a strategy to support the choreographer's own idleness.
- **In regards to the critic,** everyday has the potential to be a dance holiday. Please take a day off.
- **In regards to the artistic directors,** there is no desire to make further comments.











## La bailarina vaga

**Primero**, me voy a esforzar por ser más vaga.

- La bailarina vaga no tiene responsabilidad de bailar.
- La bailarina vaga no obstruye las vías del progreso.
- La bailarina vaga está en estado de reposo hasta que surja el deseo de bailar.
- La bailarina vaga no considera que bailar sea un medio necesario para la supervivencia.
- Para la bailarina vaga el aburrimiento resulta un riesgo, ya que pudiera despertar la tentación de producir algo. De acuerdo al conocimiento general, una bailarina debe repetirse y agotarse hasta adquirir la técnica que se desea; una bailarina debe bailar para ganarse la vida. Contrario a estas creencias, la bailarina vaga nunca baila a cambio de algo más.
- **Con respecto a la audiencia**, el placer del público se ha vuelto principalmente pasivo. Los miembros del público también suelen ser personas que trabajan, y como están cansados, a veces incluso se quedan dormidos durante la pieza de danza. Quedarse dormidos es el dispositivo a través del cual derivan la única felicidad que pueden disfrutar en ese momento. En este caso, la bailarina vaga no debe hacer ningún esfuerzo por captar su atención, ni recurrir al virtuosismo para despertarlos.



- **Con respecto al coreógrafo,** si un coreógrafo predica acerca de la dignidad de la labor de la bailarina, la bailarina vaga debe abandonar la sala. Hacer énfasis en mantener a la bailarina feliz es una estrategia para respaldar el propio estado de reposo de los coreógrafos.
- **Con respecto a los críticos,** todos los días tienen el potencial de ser días feriados para la danza. Por favor tome el día libre.
- **Con respecto a los directores artísticos,** no deseo hacer comentarios adicionales.

translation to Spanish: Nicole Cecilia Delgado (Puerto Rico)











## Y ddawnswraig ddiog

**Yn gyntaf**, gwnaf ymdrech i fod yn ddiocach.

- Nid oes rheidrwydd ar y ddawnswraig ddiog i ddawnsio.
  - Nid yw'r ddawnswraig ddiog yn rhwystro cynnydd.
  - Nes coda yr awydd i ddawnsio, mae'r ddawnswraig ddiog mewn cyflwr segur.
  - Nid yw'r ddawnswraig ddiog yn ystyried dawns, o reidrwydd, fel modd o ennill bywoliaeth.
- 
- I'r ddawnswraig ddiog mae diflastod yn beryglus oherwydd gall demtio'r ddawnswraig i gynhyrchu rhywbeth. Yn ôl y sôn dylai ddawnswraig/wr ailadrodd a blino ei hun er mwyn meithrin y dechneg a ddymunir; rhaid i ddawnswraig/wr ddawnsio er mwyn gwneud elw. Yn groes i'r daliadau hyn, dyw'r ddawnswraig ddiog byth yn dawnsio er mwyn rhywbeth arall.
- 
- **Parthed y gynulleidfa**, mae pleser cynulleidfaoedd wedi dyfod yn bennaf yn oddefol. Mae aelodau'r gynulleidfa yn weithwyr hefyd ac yn aml yn flinedig cwmpant i gysgu yn ystod perfformiadau. Daw cwsg yn ddyfais i ddeillio pa bynnag lawenydd a allant fwynhau. Yn yr achos hwn ni ddylai'r ddawnswraig ddiog ymdrech i gwbl i ennyn eu sylw, a dylid byth troi at geingarwch er mwyn eu deffro.



- **Parthed y coreograffydd**, os bydd coreograffydd yn pregethu am urddas llafur y ddawnswraig/wr, fe ddylai dawnswraig ddiog ymadael â'r ystafell. Am fod y pwyslais hwn ar blesio'r ddawnswraig/wr yn strategaeth sy'n cynnal segurdod y coreograffydd ei hunain.
- **Parthed y critig**, mae potensial i bob dydd fod yn wyliau dawns. Cymrwch y diwrnod bant os gwelwch yn dda.
- **Parthed y cyfarwyddwyr artistig**, does dim awydd i gynnig sylwadau pellach.

translation to Welsh: Ann Joyner & Siriol Joyner (Cymru/Wales)







## FRANCES KRUK

### Four poems from PIN

because I work I am  
nobody I am  
absence I have  
come here to unlearn what

am Here to work I fear  
the floors, my shoes, the table  
wooden Flash  
The Wood the Trees the Mud I have

come here to unlearn what  
I cannot Disbelieve  
no Darkness Blacker than Bright Light  
no blacker light  
no blacker light



or because I don't  
work I am  
every thing I am

every where I can't  
be seen, diatomaceous mist and all  
particulates that eat  
the lungs

there is no choice:  
You breathe you  
die you breathe you  
die



## haunting

it is not The Spectre we imagine  
not tall and raw-boned  
bloodless wired reflection  
of human form no It is  
a writhing glyph of  
disembodied hands sucking  
in and out of itself mud  
sprawl fingers and fists melting mashing  
cracking It brings  
no hope it is  
not kind We know  
it by its traces for  
they fear it, hide it, fear it, hide it.  
The hands the heads the chairs.  
The legs the jaws the webs.  
the hands we do not see the hands we do not see



(The hands that make the heads  
the heads propped up on chairs.  
The chairs are made by scalps  
the scalps creep cross the floor.  
The floor is made of moisture,  
moisture wets the soul,  
the soul dies of water,  
water's a night-howler.  
night-howlers empty nothingness,  
nothingness contains it all –  
all the night, all thick night.  
here a bloody head comes up,  
there a phantom goes,  
and there some more night like  
what's in every single eye



**SHEILA MANNIX**  
Photopoems



















*Ceci n'est pas une guerre.*





“THE BRIDE OF POETRY”  
A PESTSCHRIFT FOR CACONRAD



## AN INTERVIEW WITH CACONRAD

conducted via email, 2014-15

David Buuck:

*Tell us about your childhood and upbringing before you became a poet.*

CAConrad:

Violence. I am from a working class military family. All the men in my family have killed human beings: German, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Iraqi, and Afghan people. It's impossible to talk about my upbringing without talking about the ghosts of the people my men have killed on behalf of God and nation, and the true bosses of their God and nation on Wall Street. But instead of talking about how the rich have abused my people, I want to talk about the suffering I have witnessed in these men. Violence was completely normalized in my working class youth, and I remember realizing as a boy at one Thanksgiving dinner that all the men at the table had killed human beings. I realized this before I started chewing the meat on my plate and the very act of chewing slowed with this disturbing awareness, and I kept checking to make sure the meat in my mouth was fully cooked. It makes me sick thinking about this even now, equating the killing in war with our Thanksgiving dinner bleeding in my mouth, and so I have been a vegetarian most of my life. Thanksgiving is such an irritating holiday covering up genocide, so I'm glad it was ruined for me.

My grandfather had a helmet of a German soldier he had killed. My little boy's fingers could fit in the bullet hole, and he loved talking about killing



the Nazis. He was furious when my grandmother cleaned the helmet. He wanted the blood of the man he killed inside it. He said my grandmother had ruined his “talisman,” his proof that he belonged to a courageous tribe of Americans. One time he was a little drunk while telling his Nazi stories and he put the helmet on his own head and started to cry. It was the only time I didn’t need to search for his suffering, and he sputtered, “I have very bad dreams” and hugged me and I recall the tremendous desperation inside that hug. His brave stories of killing Nazis were a cover up of course, but because he worked in the DuPont chemical factory his suffering was mercifully short, dying young of lung cancer. I hate that goddamned factory.

It makes me very sad to think of the men in my family destroyed by war and how they’ve all had to invent stories to feel okay about what they have done. The burden of taking human life is impossible for me to imagine, but I can talk about animals I’ve killed. Hunting was important to me as a boy because I equated it with feeding people. I remember my joy the first time my family ate a pheasant I had killed and I gave a piece of meat to my hunting dog Whisper and no one questioned me doing this because it was my pheasant. Whisper was such an amazing companion and she would get very excited whenever she saw me grab my gun because she knew we were going on an adventure and at the end of it she would get to sit at the table with the rest of the family. We worked well together out there in the woods and meadows and I miss her.

But to be honest killing felt adult to me and I liked that. It has taken many years to parse out all of these complicated feelings in order for me to have a calmer, more conscious, present life. The problem was that I was a gifted hunter, patient and with a dead aim. The other boys liked hunting with me because I showed them the way to feeling adult through the killing. My grandfather



wanted me to join the Marines and become a sniper, make the family proud. I was only ten when he first bragged to his war buddies about me one day working in a higher caste of the military than the rest of the military grunts in our family. He would throw things in the air and I would shoot them and hit them all. He would hang human-shaped targets and I would shoot the faces off them. He died in 1977 when I was 11 and no one remembered his dream of making me into a fine-tuned killing machine. My grandfather wanted me to become a killer but I became a vegetarian faggot poet instead.

For the past 27 years I have been a vegetarian, and this has saved my soul. For more than a quarter century now I have been studying the bodies and lives of animals and in that study of respect and love for animals has come a deeper compassion for my fellow human animals. I DON'T LIKE MY SPECIES, but I'm developing an acceptance and compassion for us, which feels productive, helpful. But the key to ending war I believe is in the end of eating flesh because the war on animals is the same war humans have with one another. If you are weak enough to kill and dominate, then so be it, here we come with our flags, our forks and knives! One of my American heroes is Abbie Hoffman who said, "I believe in compulsory cannibalism. If people were forced to eat what they killed, there would be no more wars." I saw him give a talk when he moved his operations to Philadelphia to fight the Nuclear Regulatory Commission building the Limerick Nuclear Power Plant, and I promise you I'm right when I say he did not kill himself. The FBI assassinated Abbie Hoffman and I will go to my grave believing this. Hoffman was a fucking prophet, he was brilliant, he was fearless, and the FBI wanted him GONE and so they made him gone. Is his soul back? Has Abbie Hoffman reincarnated again on Earth? What is there to come back for? Is this merely a salvage mission soon? Stop the hemorrhaging and see what is left to survive?



DB:

*Would you feel comfortable also talking about living with your mom in her car and selling flowers, and women in your family?*

CA:

Sure, I can do that. I wanted to talk a little about the men in my family because no one ever asks me about them and it's what the men instilled in me that I've needed to work on the most. Like hunting with my grandfather and him whispering to me when I had a deer in my rifle sites, "Just pretend he's a Nazi and pull the trigger Kiddo." Nazi? What? It's so strange to me what some men need in order to kill. It is such a tremendous horror to inflict suffering and fatality that they cannot imagine just how different it is for each of us. For instance, all I wanted was to kill the deer to eat it, I loved deer sausages and chops, and for some reason when I was a boy killing was natural. I walked through the forests and meadows with my rifle and hunting dog Whisper and when I was hungry I would kill a squirrel, gut it, skin it, clean it in a creek and cook it over a little fire and eat it with Whisper. Killing gave me a feeling of security and independence, and at the time I loved nothing more. It scares me when I think about how natural it was. It was some real *Lord of the Flies* time for me. I love animals and would never dream of harming them now and I learned Reiki because they need more healing than my fellow humans at this point as we annihilate their forest homes and riverbeds and oceans.

Nothing upsets me more than the latest PETA newsletter with abused cows, pigs and chickens in factory farms. It is estimated that more than 60 billion animals are raised worldwide each year for slaughter. At the same time over half of the wild vertebrate animals have vanished in the past three decades. When will those two numbers meet? Probably in our lifetime don't you



think? It makes me sad to think of more animals born into slavery and slaughter for human food than there are wild animals. And more than a third of our grain crops are grown to feed the meat farms. I encourage everyone to be vegan just two days a week to shift these numbers. It's not that hard, just two days. It takes sixteen pounds of plants to make one pound of animal flesh. Being vegan two days a week frees up thirty-two pounds of plants per person, and many gallons of fresh water and many watts of electricity. We need to start spreading the word right now. I'm sorry, this isn't at all what you asked me about, David.

My mother, yes we lived in a car for a chunk of 1970. So we're going further back into time, back to when I was 4 and 5. Nothing makes me feel more at home than the road. My friend Tim Johnson in Marfa, Texas understands this because he lived on the road at one time and mentioned to me how hard it is to come off it. I know exactly what he means about that. My mother was running from her parents in Iowa because they wanted custody of me. The car was a convertible my grandfather had fixed up for her. We went down into Mexico at one point, but we were mostly in the states. When I was sixteen we got high together and I asked her about a memory I had where she was throwing loaves of bread at a man in a gas station. She said he had offered her money to be alone with me in the men's room and she started throwing things and screaming at him. I remember being confused in the car asking, "Why were you throwing bread at the man?" She said, "Because there was nothing sharper to get my hands on!" Much of my childhood was spent in utter confusion.

Poverty is hell mostly because the poor rank themselves by how well they hide their poverty, or by who is the poorest in town. The man working at the gas station was probably poor, but not as poor as we were, and there's



something about being THAT poor where you become a zero. People treat you as though you're not even human. When I was 18 I got high with my mother I got her to recount the story and I tried to get her to remember where we were when this happened so I could go there and beat the crap out of this guy, "HEY, remember me? I'm the kid you tried to FUCK when I was four you piece of shit!" She couldn't remember, I mean she couldn't even remember what state we were in, Tennessee, no wait, maybe Arkansas. He thought we were so useless and so unimportant that he could do whatever he wanted to us. But there were nice memories of living out there on the road and we would stay in churches once in awhile, on a hippy farm one time. The Salvation Army was the worst because they made us sing Jesus songs and listen to sermons before we could eat. It was disgusting food and there is nothing charitable about making children listen to your Jesus fairy tales before they are allowed to fill their growling bellies. I hate the Salvation Army, their name disgusts me: Salvation, Army, FUCK THEM!

I grew up hating the phrase, "Beggars can't be choosers," and I would say "FUCK YOU we can choose!" I was so angry about poverty as a kid, not about not having things so much as not being allowed to be a valued soul. All kids want to feel good about themselves and I have thought about that hippy farm over the years because there were many other kids there, younger and older than me. I remember weaving a basket and it's the only time I ever made one and I remember enjoying the process of soaking the reeds to make them pliable. But the truth is I also have thought that we kids were making baskets for the adults to sell. We were always busy making baskets while my mom and the other adults were busy getting high and fucking. In the end the fucking hippies are no better than the Amish who produce children to have their weird kingdom of worker bees working, working, working all goddamned day.



My job in the car was to secure the can opener because my mother wanted to teach me a little responsibility. I took my can opener job very seriously, always making sure it was wrapped in its handkerchief in the glove compartment when not being used. I cleaned it each morning with powdered soap in gas station restrooms. 1970 road trips were a little more rustic than they are today with the big travel complexes full of fast food and tooth brush vending machines. When we would be driving down the road sometimes she would scream with the convertible roof down and I would stand on the seat, hold onto the visor and scream along with her, and we would scream and scream and scream our heads off driving as fast as we could down the highway. I remember that well, arching my back and SCREAMING with her until we both cracked up laughing. My mother taught me well about both anger and laughter, and those lessons have saved my life and poetry more than once.

When she met Ronald Conrad we were pretty much feral, or at least I was. The car was home and I liked seeing a new place each day. My last name at the time was McNeil, but my mother convinced Conrad to marry her, adopt me and give us a stable home. He was so in love with her, but everybody was. She was gorgeous and wild, and everyone thought I was her little brother. Coming off the road was difficult because our new family in rural Pennsylvania were tidy, strict German people. While I was taking care of a can opener each morning there was a very different world of efficiency ahead of me. They were factory workers, good, obedient workers. This was almost impossible, this transition, and my Nana Conrad would scream “CREEK HUCKTAH HEET” which basically meant SIT DOWN AND SHUT UP! My name was Craig and none of these people could pronounce it, especially Nana who always called me Creek. I was always an outsider. Nana loved me, was kind, but stern. I was her new feral little animal she



needed to paper train, or whatever she had in her mind. I remember her saying to me once, "CREEK! LISTEN CREEK! There are two kinds of people on God's earth! Ones wit the hard earwax, und ones wit the soft earwax!" I said, "Nana what does that mean?" She yelled, "IT IS WHAT IT IS!" Oh my god, she was always blowing my mind with her sphinxlike riddles. When I was 12 I told Nana I was secretly a GIRL. She bought me a sewing machine. That was very sweet and kind. April 2014 was my 30th anniversary of inventing the gender-neutral name CAConrad so I can always be whoever I want to be whenever I want.

My mother was a thief and she thought she was good at it but she would get caught. And this was before the super surveillance we live with today. She couldn't get work after awhile so she put me to work, starting at age eight. She would go to a nearby town called Reading, Pennsylvania to buy wholesale fresh cut flowers, then make them into bouquets, and sit me along the highway to sell them. From eight to sixteen I was out there at the mouth of the Pennsylvania Turnpike near Quakertown with different colored rubber buckets filled with bouquets. I hate thinking about this time because it was very lonely and isolated every Friday, Saturday and Sunday sitting there for hours. And I was embarrassed, all the people driving off the turnpike seeing me sitting there. I hated it, especially smelling of car fumes each night when I would get home. There was a farmer's field behind me with one large tree in the middle of it, miles of highway, but no buildings for shelter except a gas station half a mile away. The isolation made me into a reader though, which is in itself the best thing to come out of the experience because no one in my family reads books and I'm convinced some of them are secretly illiterate to be honest. The Holy Bible and the TV Guide, that's all I remember instead of bookshelves in the houses of my youth. Even the homes of friends and neighbors were without bookshelves and the lack of books has kept this community stupid and mean.



Instead of killing myself at sixteen I rebelled and announced that I wasn't going to sell flowers ever again. I had read an essay on child labor in foreign countries and I told my mother that there were laws against what she was doing to me in America. It was reading that set me apart, and the more I read the more I realized I needed to leave and find people who gave the world a better chance than the Holy Bible and the TV Guide.

DB:

*How did you end up getting yourself to Philly and 'becoming a poet'?*

CA:

It was difficult to leave because my mother's new husband was a pedophile who had tried to rape my little sister when we were younger. But by the time I was eighteen and she was fourteen he didn't seem interested in her. When she was six and seven were the worst years and I spent a lot of time making sure she was never alone with him. It was terrifying and traumatizing. I told him years later when he was angry at me how I would sit in my sister's room with my loaded rifle pointed at the door. It shook him, and it made me happy to shake him. I told him he should have gone to prison. I told him there were times in my sister's room I prayed he would finally break the lock and force his way in so I could just shoot him and be done with it. The terror of living in his house needed a lot of therapy.

At one point in the late 1980s I had a boyfriend who was a poet, long before my vow to never sleep with poets. If the alarm clock didn't go off and we slept in late he would get angry and yell FUCK FUCK FUCK WE'RE FUCKING LAZY, and then he would become depressed and it was difficult to snap him out of it no matter what I said. He was a



student at Penn, the Ivy League school in Philadelphia, but he had an apartment downtown near mine. His mother would call him several times a day, and this is before cell phones so she was leaving long messages on his answering machine, things like, “Your father and I think you should consider law school...” followed with fifteen reasons why law school was a good idea. One time she left a message saying, “Your father’s friends were all competing at a party last night about which one was going to convince you to work for their firm and marry their daughters, isn’t that nice dear?” It was my first window into how class structure worked on the lives of the children of the rich. His life was stifling, expected to perform at a certain level all the time and even sleeping in late was to him a sign of weakness and he never seemed to enjoy his money, his car, or anything really. He gravitated to me because I lived a life he knew nothing about and he immersed himself for a time in me, and where I lived in Philadelphia, my friends, the poetry readings, the bars, but he never allowed me to come to Penn or meet his friends, not that I wanted to frankly, everyone where he was from sounded boring. This was when I realized for the first time the freedom I had with no one breathing down my neck to achieve and succeed. He wanted to be a poet but I suspect he stopped writing like 95% of everyone I knew in my early twenties. He was entirely too obedient to his desire to please his parents to maintain the interests of the Muse.

Class is something I am aware of all the time, and it is the most difficult conversation to have, even in the arts. It seems especially harder to have the conversation now though, it feels like the Ronald Reagan era all over again where the young rich kids are proud of their wealth and seem obliged to luxuriate in it in front of the world. To me it’s like an exposed hangnail, that kind of blatant torque of money in plain sight, just throwing it at the DJ and believing they deserve it.



As I mentioned earlier my aunt Darlene retired a year ago from a dental floss factory and died six months ago. When I wrote about this on Facebook I complained about the factory owners being greedy, having listened to my aunt talk about company executives owning palatial homes and summer cottages while making the factory go into mandatory overtime to compete for staying on top of the dental floss buck. Someone commented on my Facebook post, "Not all rich people are like this." Which I agree with of course, but then a young artist clicked "Like" to that person's comment, which made me curious. Minutes later the young artist posted on their wall, "I'm so tired of the shit talk against the rich. Don't people realize that the wealthy create jobs? Rich people built this country! Rich people are the ones who made America great!" I commented on their post, "Actually slaves built this country, actual slaves, real live human beings who were kidnapped from the shores of Africa, put into ships built by rich people, then brought here to work for them for free. It was the free labor that created the wealth and when I posted earlier about my aunt Darlene I made it clear that her life was awful. She worked for years tending to dental floss, smelling millions of miles of thin white threads of mint and cinnamon day after day and she was so corrupted by the degraded standard of her factory life that she did not even know how to retire. When she retired and she drank herself to death. Get a history book and stop being so goddamned stupid all your life."

DB:

*How did you move from your first book to the Elvis project? Or were they overlapping projects as with the ongoing Book of Frank?*

CA:

Investigations into past lives had a lot to do with moving into *Advanced Elvis Course*, but then again these inquiries influenced much of what I was

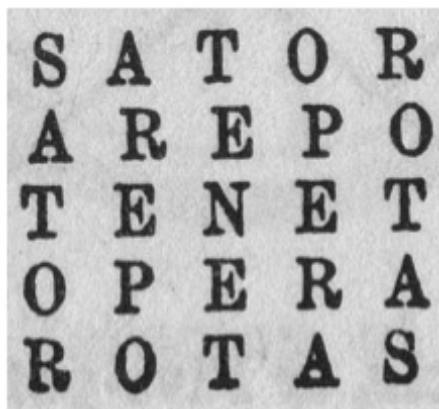


writing at the time. My sister was having trouble with her massage practice where her hands burned at the end of the day and there was nothing she could do about it, no matter what cure she attempted. A friend suggested we see a psychic who specialized in past lives. The psychic had never met us and had no idea who we were. This was over twenty-five years ago, but I remember the clear, calming eyes of this woman, they were so soothing we didn't mind the smell of mildew and cat piss. She didn't draw things out with formalities, she closed her eyes and started talking, saying that my sister was a healer in a past life and that enemy invaders had cut off her hands and destroyed her home and community.

We were both shocked, especially because this woman had no idea that my sister was having trouble with her hands and that she made her living as a healer. Later my sister decided to quit her massage practice and the burning in her hands never returned. Even though I had not intended to get a reading for myself the psychic closed her eyes and told me that I had been a warrior in a past life and she could see symbols painted on my face and body. This was amazing information because when I was a boy I had frequent nose bleeds and my favorite thing to do when I felt one coming on was to secretly lock myself in the bathroom, take off my clothes and cover my face, arms, chest and penis with blood and it tightened my skin as it dried and became very smooth. After it dried I would dip my fingers in water and draw symbols into the blood and then I would hold my arms overhead and chant, not words but deep resounding tones. I had a dream that Elvis was part of my tribe and in the book I created a Magic Elvis Square, which was comprised of a series of letters to compliment the Sator Formula, or Magic Square that the elders where I grew up in rural Pennsylvania would carry around with them. In 2007 I showed the renowned Norse scholar Freya Aswynn my Magic Elvis Square and she gave me her opinion and a few tips



for changing certain letters. She also gave me a rune reading and lectured me on Elvis, telling me that he has joined the pantheon and that I should be careful with the book and to not fuck it up. Nana Conrad taught me to draw the original Magic Square and told me it came from the Rhineland with her ancestors. Freya said that it traveled north into Europe and that there were tablets with the Magic Square found under the ashes of Pompeii. It looks like this:



DB:

*How did you decide to move into your (soma)tic poetry practice?*

CA:

First let me thank you for this opportunity David. It means a lot to me that one of my favorite poets and people would take the time to interview me. You are amazing!



Growing up in a rural factory town I watched my creative family extend the grind of their monotonous jobs outside the factory walls and into their lives until they were no longer capable of accessing their artistic abilities. Nana Conrad had a shelf in her living room with little clay sculptures and drawings by her nine children, but nothing after the age of five. I was fascinated by that shelf as a child and one day I asked Nana, “Where is the art they are making now?” She said, “They’re working, they haven’t got time for making art!” After that it always felt like a shelf dedicated to nine people who died at age five. They had five years to be encouraged to be free with their imaginations and Nana proudly displayed their BEAUTIFUL little multicolored drawings and pinched clay sculptures of horses and frogs. That shelf was a memorial to the days when the soul flexed some muscle. I was determined to stay alive past the age of five.

The factory was the problem; it divorced my family from their essential creative selves. When I was a child they all worked in the same factory, and it was a coffin factory. I had a queer cousin Dolly Conrad who transitioned – late 70’s – and suddenly appeared at family picnics as David Conrad. When he returned to work at the factory as David the men would not allow him to use the men’s room and the women would not let him back into the women’s room. David had to use a hole in the floor of the janitor’s closet to go to the bathroom. The hole is where the janitor poured mop water down to the sewer. Once when waiting for my father to finish his shift I looked for and found that closet and stood in front of the open door imagining my cousin being made to squat over this crusty, disgusting hole while everyone else had toilet paper and mirrors and soap. Everyone in this story is lost without the skills their murdered imaginations could have helped them with. Instead they stay inside the same old loops of degradation. What a fucking mess. Even David WANTING to have his new life in the same



old bigoted, horrible, dirty little illiterate country town. I used to idolize David, my queer, trans cousin, but then he started going to jail for beating his girlfriends and then I hated him as much as I hated everyone else where I grew up. My idol turned out to be just another stupid, tyrannical man who is a violent bully to women.

The coffin factory was an old 19<sup>th</sup> century workshop factory, meaning that those jobs always demanded a certain set of artistic skills to be able to work with wood, fabric, resins, etc., but after president Bill Clinton's NAFTA the factory went to Mexico and my family was devastated. I hate Bill Clinton. Actually I think I hate people who STILL need to believe in him, lying to themselves that he was a good man, and that he cared. He not only destroyed the working classes with NAFTA, he then went after the poorest of the poor with his Welfare Reform. But after the coffin factory moved, a factory that had been the center of my little country town's existence for over a century, my family started working in different, modern factories producing cardboard boxes, detergents, cough drops, frozen pies, dental floss. My aunt Darlene saw millions of miles of dental floss, and it was a horribly oppressive place when I visited her at the factory, one side of the building smelling of mint, the other side like cinnamon. When I was a kid I asked her once if she ever dreamed about the factory at night. She grabbed my shirt collar and yelled, "Don't you EVER ask me that again!" That was the most memorable Yes to a question I asked of anyone. She retired a year ago. She died six months ago. She drank herself to death, started drinking the day she retired and didn't stop until it killed her.

A weird detail too is that the old coffin factory was turned into a nursing home. That's what it is now. Elderly people getting ready for the coffins that used to be made there. And I wonder how many of the residents used



to work at the factory making coffins? My father used to threaten me as a teenager that I was going to work in the factory and I dreaded the idea and would dream of it burning down to liberate me from the future he saw for me. The factory had destroyed my family. This wouldn't happen to me, I thought, and moved to a large city to foster my skills as an artist and to surround myself with likeminded people. For many years this was feeling right, that I was doing exactly what I came to do, not working in the factory back home.

But to directly answer your question David, in 2005 when visiting my family for a reunion I listened again to their stories about the factory, and as always these stories saddened me. On the train ride home I had an epiphany that I had been treating my poetry like a factory, an assembly line, and doing so in many different ways, from how I constructed the poems, to my tabbed and sequenced folders for submissions to magazines, contests, etc. When I got home and threw the door to my apartment open I could see the factory on my desk. I wanted to vomit; it was so shocking that it was a physical reaction, this self-betrayal. What a lie, what a FUCKING LIE, my escape was just another factory prison!

This was a crisis, and I stopped writing for nearly a month, needing to figure out how to climb out of these factory-like structures, or to quit writing altogether. But I wanted to thrive in the crisis rather than end the trajectory of self-discovery the poems had set me on over the years. One morning I made a list of the worst problems with the factory, and at the top of that list was "lack of being present." The more I thought about this the more I realized this was what the factory robbed my family of the most, and the thing that frightened me the most, this not being aware of place in the present. That morning I started what I now call (Soma)tics, ritualized



structures where being anything but present was next to impossible. These rituals create what I refer to as an “extreme present” where the many facets of what is around me wherever I am can come together through a sharper lens. It has been inspiring that (Soma)tics reveal the creative viability of everything around me.

DB:

*What's next for you & your writing?*

CA:

I am in the middle of doing a nationwide (Soma)tic poetry ritual titled “RESURRECT EXTINCT VIBRATION.” I had a dream while I was in Asheville that I was lying on the ground in Pennsylvania where they are fracking for natural gas. I could FEEL all this pressure and intense pain underneath me that became deep grumbling voices. I sat up and vomited on my notebook, then started writing a poem through the vomit. I remembered thinking it was a good pen to be able to write through vomit, like in the middle of the dream thinking I NEED MORE OF THESE PENS! I LOVE THEM! When I woke from the dream I wrote in my notebook to lie on the ground and listen when I am in Pennsylvania. Well, minus the vomit, but I wanted to lie on the ground and listen for these dark, pained voices I was hearing in the dream.

Then I was visiting my brilliant friend Melissa Buzzeo to give a talk for her students at PRATT and we exchanged divinations. I read her tarot and she read my palm. Melissa reads palms through a trance and voices speak through her. She looked up and said, “They are telling me to tell you to lie on the ground wherever you go.” Immediately I knew it was about the dream where I was lying on the ground. At the same time I was starting to



obsess about field recordings of extinct animals. The World Wildlife Fund's biennial Planet Index was published in September 2014 stating that 52 percent of all wild animals have vanished in the past four decades.

My mother called me at the end of March to wish me a happy half-century and I thought she was losing it because my birthday is January 1<sup>st</sup>. She said, "No, I'm talking about when you were conceived. This is the day my dear!" So that was an interesting phone call as you can imagine, but "RESSURECT EXTINCT VIBRATION" is a ritual where I lie on the ground and listen to various recordings of recently extinct birds, mammals and reptiles, especially from the past several decades. When my initial human cells were forming inside my mother I had these vibrations in me. These vibrations existed in real time in 1965 and my birth, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966. Children born today in 2015 are being formed on less than half of those organic, wild sounds, and they are filled with more of the sounds of machines, the beeps, the engine roars, bombs, and the other things we humans are replacing the natural world with as we claw and shit our way across the globe into oblivion.

So in this ritual I saturate myself with field recordings of recently extinct birds and animals while taking long naps on the earth across America. I begin writing as soon as I wake from this long 108-minute nap, but in the sleeping I return the vibrations of these creatures to my cells, viewing Ecopoetics as not only degraded soil, air and water, but also as vibrational absence. When a species becomes extinct they take all of their sounds of breathing, play, desire, hunger, fear, anger, all of it leaves with them. I am accepting and recording the sixth mass extinction of Earth currently underway.

When I talk about this ritual I say I am returning these sounds to my body; it's a returning, a restoration of vibratory frequencies my cells recall and I



wake from the trance-nap oddly refreshed, ready to write, EXCITED to write, like an old friend had just appeared out of nowhere to give me a hug. It doesn't matter where you live on the planet; the black rhinoceros became officially extinct in 2014. They were here, they were part of our web of living, breathing, fellow sentient beings, and now they are gone forever and we feel it, we feel their absence. The dusky seaside sparrow, this gorgeous little bird with the most remarkable song, extinct from the Florida coast in 1988. I found the song of the delicate, small creature online and you can too. Listen to it. Find the recording, put on headphones, and play it over and over like I do and tell me you don't feel like some small missing part of you is now returning.

But of course they are NOT returning, which makes this one of the most cruel rituals I have ever done to myself. It has been depressing me lately and I had to stop and do other rituals to keep healthy. Researchers have bones, feathers, claws, tusks and horns in boxes and drawers and thousands of notes about where they used to sleep at night, what they used to eat, how they used to play and show affection. The video and audio of these creatures is of course the most haunting thing about their extinction. We captured the remnants of their movement and music, we could invent the technology to be able to capture their cries and motions, but we didn't leave room for them to live. What the fuck are we doing here at this very moment? Billions and billions of animals have been snuffed out of the wilderness in a mere four decades by us and I am not surprised so many people are obsessed with video games, preferring at this late hour of Earth the virtual world over the real one.

When I was a child there were just a couple billion people on Earth. Now there are over 7 billion of us, soon turning into 8. I don't like us, I don't like my own species. It's a form of self-hatred and I just have to own it. It



took me years to LIVE with being queer only to find out it doesn't matter because I hate being human more than being a queer human. I guess if I HAVE to be a human then being a queer one is more tolerable for me. I don't know why that is, maybe because it's outside the norm. Not outside enough though, especially these days with faggots waving the American flag and tearing up with the rest of the assholes when the national anthem is played.

There are other, shorter (Soma)tic poetry rituals I am currently working on. One is called ANGRY BUBBLES. This is designed around my family's obsession with contagion. Ever since my boyfriend Tommy died of AIDS in the 1990's they have been obsessed with me coming into their homes, in fact one uncle will not allow me to use his bathroom even though HIV is not contracted through toilet seats, and never mind the simple fact that I am HIV negative. The world of stupid bigots is my target for this (Soma)tic where I stand on busy street corners and blow bubbles, children's bubbles, you know what I mean. But I blow them angrily, filling the air with bubbles while yelling, "THESE BUBBLES WILL GIVE YOU AIDS! THESE BUBBLES GIVE YOU EBOLA! THESE BUBBLES WILL GIVE YOU THE SHITS! THESE BUBBLES WILL MAKE YOU QUEER!" I want to see what kinds of conversations can be had with strangers around this ritual. I tried it in St. Louis but everyone just crossed the street. Then an old woman named Carla came around the corner with her walker and she grabbed the bubbles out of my hand and started blowing them, saying, "No, no, see how pretty they are?" And I just gave up and said, "Yes, you're right." I need to try it again, but I loved Carla, she was great to meet.

Another is called INCEST WINGS. There is a street in Philadelphia where people with bullhorns gather to declare different religious and political



views. My family is obsessed with conspiracy theories and the return of Jesus and they love to quote The Book of John to me. I have always wanted to create my own conspiracy theory and INCEST WINGS is it. With a bullhorn I will declare, "THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE INCEST ILLEGAL BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT THE RECESSIVE GENE WILL BRING BACK WINGS! WE NEED TO RETURN THIS WORLD TO THE ANGELIC CHOIR AND THE ONLY WAY TO AWAKEN THE LEGION OF ANGELS IS TO SLEEP WITH OUR MOTHERS, FATHERS, SISTERS AND BROTHERS! WE NEED TO DO THIS TODAY! WE MUST BRING GOD'S ARMY OF ANGELS BACK INTO THE WORLD TO LEAD US TO SALVATION!" I'm look forward to this, "CAN I GET AN AMEN I SAID CAN I GET AN AMEN!?"

I just finished co-editing with Joshua Beckman and Robbie Dewhurst *SUPPLICATION*: the selected poems of John Wieners. What an extraordinary opportunity it was, not only to be editing poems by one of my favorite poets, a queer poet who has guided me many times in my life through his poems like a fairy godmother, but also the chance to work with Joshua and Robbie, two of my favorite living poets and people. Have you read Joshua's book *THE INSIDE OF AN APPLE*, it is like a lathe shaving away all but the most exquisite syllables around us. But just before finishing the editing of John Wieners's selected poems with my friends I drove from Philadelphia to Tucson, stopping at every truck stop and road stop along the way to read his poems to strangers. My favorite was reading in restrooms, a dozen men pissing at the urinals and I would just start reading without warning, "A POEM FOR COCKSUCKERS by JOHN WIENERS!" A few men were upset, but sometimes there was curiosity and interest in the poems and why I was doing these readings. I treated it as a (Soma)tic Poetry



Ritual, even the sex I had. I hooked up with a few truckers and that was quite lovely. I did some things out there with men that I have never done before and trust me I thought that I had heard of everything at this point in my life. Jumper cable sex for instance, no joke, and it was quite relaxing and pleasant those lubricated jumper cables. Jumper cable sex in honor of our fairy godmother poet John Wieners!

At the moment I am also in the middle of my PACE The Nation project. PACE is an acronym for Poet Activist Community Extension, and I cofounded it in Philadelphia in 2004 with friends Frank Sherlock, Mytili Jagannathan, and Linh Dinh. We took our poems out onto the streets to read to strangers. And we would give them photocopies of the poems. I am driving around the United States to do PACE Actions with as many communities of poets as possible in different towns and cities, taking our poems out onto the streets to read to everyone we find. I am also interviewing the poets wherever I go, asking them to talk about the conditions of their lives and asking them what they think we can do to cure our nation's obsession with war. Every single time I am out there I am also honoring my friends Frank, Mytili and Linh.

More than a few people have asked me if I am okay not having a home. It worries people that I gave up my apartment in August of 2013 and that I have been on the road ever since. I like to answer with the quote, "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself instead of the life others expected of me." Bronnie Ware is a nurse who worked with the dying and she kept track of their regrets as these people died. This quote is the number one regret of the dying. And from what I can tell if you conquer this one all the others I read on her list of compiled regrets will simply fall away, things like, "I wish I had been happier." Live in this world with me,



please, truly live! And enough of Hope as I loathe this word, in fact Hope is at the top of my most hated words. Hope is all about the future, never about the present. Hope is the word for the laziest people, placing Hope on some other generation to fix how we have damaged our world, ruined our planet. Hope is a waste of our true potential and I remember my boyfriend Tommy in the 1990s finally surrendering to the fact that he was going to die of AIDS. I can still see his face the day he surrendered Hope and he was the most beautiful man I had ever met the day he started to fully live his remaining days. I am forever grateful to him for what he gave me in his surrender of Hope. How lucky am I to be on this planet not looking for a home but instead to be excited to be wherever I am without Hope.



# CACONRAD

*from* Width of a Witch

## Jupiter.1

as backup  
money became  
IOUs my lipstick  
smear gave cheating  
a certain charm  
just kiss me  
asshole  
nothing like  
screaming to give away the theater of sex  
the last one was the last one  
until the new last one comes winging in  
it's poetry it's always about love  
snake oil salesman in bathtub  
pennies on his eyelids  
when his spirit gets  
caught on teeth of  
the pumpkin we stick  
a candle inside



## **Jupiter.2**

he punched my face to remind me  
    of something I forgot  
    he apologized when he  
    stopped hating faggots  
congratulations I am remembering  
all                   of it now  
all night egging him on to jump higher and higher and  
this is not the way he wanted things to make up the rest of the road  
    never mind me telling him it is over  
        that  
        all we  
        came  
        up here for was the love



### **Jupiter.3**

can I babysit  
teach them  
basic disobedience  
to be deaf to factory bells  
there's an annoying poet  
who says she killed poetry  
just ask her at each poetry reading  
"is this another memorial service for you"  
if poetry is dead call me a necrophiliac  
I don't want children to inherit the earth  
I want them to snatch it from heedless  
adults before it's milked  
all wish lists at  
once is  
heavenly



#### **Jupiter.4**

“I’m sorry I’m dying”  
I couldn’t believe he said it  
I can’t believe I held his hand  
and didn’t ask him why he said it  
they leave the sobbing to the survivors  
a very  
nasty  
trick  
like idiots we accept  
centuries of anger through our pens  
it’s okay to be happy is what  
you have been waiting to hear as  
you approach the room where  
I just wrote in red NO



## The Puppet Job

We had no idea what to expect, but we knew we loved puppets. My friend Elizabeth and I desperately needed jobs and while I was busy trying to think of ways NOT to get a job, she found an ad in the newspaper looking to hire puppeteers for a traveling theater troupe. After my boyfriend Andy went to prison all the late night parties the rich kids invited us to suddenly came to an abrupt end. Actually a couple of calls came in, but when I told them Andy had been busted they politely uninvited me. After all it was really Andy's cocaine they were inviting, even though they liked having us around, young, cute stoned warm faggots that we were, in the end it was the drugs they wanted at the party.

With the end of Andy's cocaine also came the end of easy cash. I needed a job; my best friend Elizabeth needed a job. Rent was very difficult to pay without the boyfriend, the motorcycle, and the fulltime party paycheck. "Okay," I said, "what is this?" The ad promised we would travel America while making money. We loved to travel America and had crossed the country twice already in Elizabeth's red truck. We loved puppets and wondered if they would provide the puppets for us, or if we needed to buy them, and since we were broke we hoped we could borrow them, at least for the audition.

My unwavering study of poetry didn't make me any more employable and even though Andy was in prison he at least knew what people wanted to buy. Do puppets make you more money than a firm understanding of Rilke's intentions in the Duino Elegies? What a terrible world it is to bring such truth to light. The landlord said she didn't care where the money came from, and I thought, "yeah okay well if you knew where the money



was coming from the last two years and still took it then I guess I would have to trust your statement.” Elizabeth was always more responsible than me. My mother was an alcoholic stoner bum while her mother had a steady job down at the Welfare Office. Elizabeth’s work ethic was starting to rub off on me these days and I was willing to give this puppet audition a shot.

Puppets were marvelous. We went to queer anarchist puppet shows in Philadelphia all the time. They were lots of fun, smoking weed and everyone making out at intermission, but they didn’t seem to make money so it was difficult to imagine how money came into the equation. Also I had to admit that while I liked these puppet shows in dirty squatter houses, it was one thing watching them, another thing entirely performing them. I tried dating a cute young anarchist puppeteer once, but he was never quite there when he was there. He had a puppet that was his private puppet, one he never used in shows, and he made this clear when introducing you to it. “Don’t call him *it*,” he would say, “he has a name, Squishymodo, and he is a *him*, not an *it*.” “Okay, sorry, and Hello Squishymodo, nice to meet you.” Squishymodo asked for a kiss in his weird high-pitched voice and I really didn’t want to kiss his fabric-covered paper mache lips. The puppeteer’s lips were what I wanted, were what I had wanted for weeks leading up to this first date. Suddenly Squishymodo was in my face telling me I was cute and asked me to stick my tongue out. Was I stupid agreeing to do this? Squishymodo clamped my tongue with his fabric mouth that instantly tasted like old gym socks and I gagged, puke rising up my throat. I was coughing when Squishymodo tried to soothe me by undoing my belt. Maybe to some people this was kinky, but I wanted the boy, not his repulsive tasting puppet. Anarchist Puppet Land took a dark turn when I tugged my belt back into place and grabbed my jacket. Squishymodo followed after me, yelling apologies for not being normal enough for me “SORRY I’M A FREAK SORRY YOU NEED TO DATE A BANKER!” Squishymodo was wrong about me, but he was



probably wrong about a lot of things with his big dumb magic marker violet eyes that never blinked. I thought about telling the cute anarchist puppeteer that he was using Squishymodo to sublimate his internalized homophobia, but Squishymodo was so angry that I just wanted to get away from his spate of insults. To me it was like he was saying “THE PUPPET IS QUEER, NOT ME NOT ME!” It was creepy, but it was more sad than creepy I had to admit.

Would Elizabeth and I start talking to one another through puppets? Would we have our own Squishymodos talking from our beds in cheap hotels in Indiana while on the road with the traveling puppet troupe? Maybe I should have had sex with Squishymodo to get to his hot boy whose hand was up inside him. If he had washed Squishymodo once in awhile I might have let him do anything with me, but I just couldn't get the taste of that nasty puppet off my tongue. I guess I could have rinsed my mouth and gotten back to business, but gagging is never my idea of foreplay, so I decided to endure the screaming puppet on my way back to the streets of Chinatown, Philadelphia.

If I had a Pulitzer I wouldn't need this puppeteer job. My poems were much better than Sylvia Plath's and she didn't even enjoy her Pulitzer, too busy with her head in the oven. Poems can pay the bills, I know they can I know they can I know they can I kept saying, trying to will the universe into making things land right for me. The award wasn't the award for me, it was the time, and the Pulitzer would pay the bills while I wrote and sifted the libraries for books I had yet to meet. Pulitzer, ha!! That's funny. All those rich kids who used to invite us to parties didn't even realize how nice it was to have the electric paid and rent paid and enough cash left over for their all-night cocaine bashes. Those sons of bitches didn't even care that Andy was in jail, and that I was now living with my best friend because I had been evicted. I thought, “OH the poems I could write with their money.” Yeah, money equals time equals POETRY!



Elizabeth was great to live with; we were the family we always wanted. She dressed as a boy some days and tied her girlfriends to the bed while we smoked weed and cooked beans and rice in the kitchen. Living with her made me feel responsible for my life while still finding time to enjoy things. A couple of painkillers from the poet Etheridge Knight's girlfriend who worked at the hospital rinsed down with whiskey and we were ready for our puppeteer audition. "Let me untie Tina and let's get this shit done," she said. Marijuana, opiates and whiskey were the perfect combination to trail out on a smooth trip. I imagined traveling through my birthplace of Kansas with the puppet job and meeting a nice boy who worked in a diner. Red hair and a sharp jaw, and we would be yelling for him to just jump on this traveling wagon with us, JUST DO IT, "do it for love" I would say. The saddest thing in this world is meeting someone who has never been loved. I think of all the tenderness I've known being quiet and held after a fiery fuck and it breaks my heart knowing not everyone gets the love. There should be a law against the deprivation of kindness and kisses. Whenever I am covered by the nuclear warmth of a man's sleeping torso I'm nearly in tears for these stray dogs of neglect, can't we just let them in for a little while please, give them all what they need. I missed Andy and hoped he found a nice man in prison, but I knew things were probably awful for him in there, and there was nothing I could do to change that.

Earlier in the morning I had finished sewing a new pair of pants I cut from bright blue Cookie Monster fur. Ah, yeah, they fit PERFECT around the waist, and a bright orange shirt to finish it up! That and glitter nail polish and a little glitter face powder, I looked in the mirror and thought, "yeah you look like someone who should work with puppets, HOW COULD THEY POSSIBLY SAY NO TO THIS?" "C'mon," Elizabeth said, "let's go." We split the last of Etheridge's pills and started driving to New Jersey. The audition was at a hotel and they needed two new puppeteers before the show could get on the road. "Hmm," I said, "to go across America making money with a piece of talking fabric around your hand, it just didn't seem



right with my world that that was the meal ticket and not the exquisite verse awaiting the pen. Don't they know how important poetry is, doesn't anyone get it, GODDAMMIT WHOSE IDEA WAS THIS PLANET ANYWAY?" "Oh my GOD would you relax," she said. We laughed. We laughed a lot about my belief that poems could buy us a luxury condo and a hot pool boy. "Honey you can keep that pool boy for yourself," she said. We were early for the audition and hungry. There was a grocery store next to the hotel but we didn't have much money. I told Elizabeth to stop counting the coins on her dashboard and that I would take care of it. Ten minutes later I was back in the car with a quart of milk and a box of Pop Tarts. "We don't have a toaster you know." "Trust me they're just fine right out of the box." "Your mother taught you to shoplift." "Yeah, sort of, that and a few other skills." We laughed. She said, "my mother warned me about boys with mothers like yours." "Yeah but you're a dyke." "Yeah and she doesn't have much to say about that," we laughed again, getting higher and higher from the pills the whiskey the weed and the new addition of high fructose corn syrup breakfast food. No wonder kids don't learn anything in America with the shit they eat for breakfast, and I know firsthand because I was always ready for a nap the moment I arrived to class after a meal of chocolate cookie cereal drenched in chocolate milk. Then I was given detention for sleeping. Then I stopped showing up and was given out of school suspension. My mother dragged me into the principal's office telling him "oh man you're a genius, he cuts school so you give him a vacation, just how brilliant are you?" After that it was in-school suspension naptimes for me.

Elizabeth and I were stoned in that way that makes you feel ready for the world ready to prove we deserved those puppet jobs. We were young and hot and fun and who wouldn't want us around? Yeah! Of course they would hire us! We entered the hotel lobby and I immediately locked eyes with the cute man behind the desk. Elizabeth asked where the audition room was. He told us but I was still lost in his dimples and clean white teeth. "Hello"



I said. "Hello" he said with an inviting grin and nostril flare. "C'mon," she said and shoved me toward the elevator. "But I'm in love with him," I said and we laughed trying to get the elevator doors to close. Suddenly the cute hotel clerk reached inside and flipped a switch. We exchanged smiles and I said, "I love a man who knows how to make me go up in the world." "You're corny" she said and took his hand away from the door, telling him we'd see him after we did what we came here to do. "But I see exactly what I came here to do" I said. He blew me a kiss just as the doors closed. She shook her head, "you're such a whore," she said, and we laughed.

We had no idea what to expect, but we knew we loved puppets. Were we thinking everyone waiting their try at the job would be like the queer anarchist puppeteers of Philadelphia getting high and always trying to see how to get the orgy started? The room we walked into was very different from a pre-orgy setup. It wasn't just that we did a few too many pills before the Pop Tarts; it was a strange, cold scene. No matter how high she got Elizabeth could get a job done, and she asked where we should sign in. There were a half dozen people waiting, around our age, but serious looking, actually they were angry looking, wearing suits and spit shine shoes, and was that a bible in one woman's hands, and was she really wearing white gloves? Who are these people, and did they actually think THEY would get the puppet job over US? "For this job" I thought to myself, "you would certainly need to be FUN and outgoing, but this was the stiffest room I had been in in years." They looked at my Cookie Monster blue fur pants and Elizabeth's slicked back dyke hair with contempt and I was sure we were in the wrong room. "Elizabeth this has to be the wrong place." "Shut up," she said, "it's not, just sit down."

One guy looked like a twenty year old Piggy from Lord of the Flies. Once I dreamed I met Piggy. He was an old man and when he told me who he was I had some questions, but he wanted to say what he wanted to say no matter what I asked. For instance I asked "was the island real?" "Let me tell



you something,” he said, “that bastard William Golding never paid me a cent.” “You’re kidding,” I said, “that book sells millions of copies each year for English classes all over the world.” “Yeah well,” he said, “when I played in the movie *Deliverance* years later he paid the director to make me squeal like a pig and I said no way, I’m not doing it, and the director said oh yeah well if you want to get a paycheck chump you better squeal Piggy Piggy squeal now for us Piggy!” “THAT WAS YOU IN *DELIVERANCE*?” “Fuck you I said to him because in the first story I was crawling all over the fucking island with broken glasses while these horny bastards were trying to rape me.” “RAPE YOU?” “Things are much better now that I’m collecting my pension. I outlived them all you see, so I guess that’s good.” “What the HELL is he talking about?” I thought. “Wow, I’m really talking to PIGGY FROM *LORD OF THE FLIES*!” You always have to wake up though, right?

“Do you have experience with puppets?” asked an annoyed looking woman with a tidy haircut and pursed lips. Wow, I had checked out for a bit, maybe a little too stoned because I didn’t remember her coming in the room. “Yes,” Elizabeth lied, “we do puppet shows all the time in Philadelphia.” “Yeah,” I said, “we love it and when the puppets die from cancer or car accidents I skin them and make them into pants, see?” I laughed. “Yes I see your pants,” she said without so much as a smile and handed us both clipboards with a lot of questions like “what church are you affiliated with?” And “will your pastor act as a reference?” Okay so this was all wrong, clearly all wrong. We sat there giggling over the forms together, I mean what the HELL are we supposed to be answering here, and is this really even happening? The newspaper ad hadn’t said anything about mean church people; it said travel America with puppets, you know, making it sound like some kind of Ginsberg-Kerouac animation road trip.

“You’re next” the woman said walking back into the room. We shrugged and followed her through a long hall, up some stairs and into a large room



with cameras and screens. We were each given Muppet rip-offs with thick braids of hair and insanely happy eyes. A man introduced himself as the director and asked if we could work more than one puppet at a time. What? Holy shit. A young woman informed us we would be judged by how well we lip sync the puppets to the words we sang off the Teleprompters.

The music started and I burst out laughing. They started again, and then the words, "DON'T DO DRUGS, DON'T DO DRUGS, HERE WE ARE KIDS TO TELL YOU DON'T DO DRUGS, DON'T DO DRUGS!" Don't do drugs? "LISTEN TO YOUR PARENTS AND DON'T DO DRUGS, DON'T DO DRUGS!" I burst out laughing again, gasping for air and Elizabeth caught the contagion of laughter with me. When I caught my breath I said, "but my mother is my drug dealer and I have a line of credit for acid and pot!" With that we were on our knees laughing to the point of causing pains in the stomach, a tummy ache, like puppets feel from too much joy and church music.

We were asked to leave of course, the woman with the clipboards escorted us out, chattering angrily all the way saying "we're trying to do God's work" and blah blah blah she said. "HEY KIDS, LET'S DO DRUGS, LET'S DO DRUGS," I started to sing at the elevator. The woman threatened to call the police if we didn't leave immediately. "Jesus fucking Christ lady," Elizabeth said, "we're leaving as fast as we can!" "Don't you take the Lord's name IN VAIN in front of me!" "Fine," I said, "then we'll do it when you're back is turned!" This was one of those moments that made me think of how my friend Charles would respond. Since he's been in grad school he says the most annoying things we wind up arguing about. Like one day he said, "everything is fiction." "What does that mean," I said. "There is no such thing as nonfiction he said, it's all fiction." "That's stupid," I said, "so you mean my grandmother isn't really dead Charles, is that what you're saying, you're saying she's just hiding from me, but why would she do that, did she really not love me, was her love fiction?" "No, that's not what my



professor meant.” “Your professor?” “Yeah, he started off creative writing class today by saying everything is fiction.” “And?” “And he went on from there.” “Charles did you ever think he WANTS someone in the room to challenge him, to argue with him, I mean you’re in college now, you’re not just supposed to go around repeating professors like a parrot.” Charles is a really nice guy, and it broke my heart when he took my advice and started arguing with the “everything is fiction” professor and was asked to leave the classroom. Maybe I’m not the best one for advice about college.

Here we were waiting for the elevator left with nothing but belligerence on our side, so I started laughing and found that I simply couldn’t STOP MYSELF! “You think it’s funny” she said slamming her clipboards together, “well we have twenty five churches to do Sunday School puppet shows for in the next several months all across America and we intend to bring God’s word” blah blah blah she went on and on until the elevator doors finally cut her off. How fucking horrible is the idea of doing puppet shows for Sunday Schools across the United States of America? I make neon blue fake fur pants on a sewing machine my grandmother gave me for my twelfth birthday after I told her I was secretly a girl. My best friend is a dyke who drives a red truck with a sticker on the bumper that says “REAL WOMEN DRIVE TRUCKS!” I grew up around people like these puppet evangelists, and they REALLY DID think I should kill myself, not a figure of speech whatsoever. “Oh Elizabeth, it’s a long messy story honey, let’s just smile and get on with it.” The cute hotel clerk laughed with us when he saw us roaring out of the elevator. “You BASTARD,” I said, “YOU KNEW what we were walking into!” I forgave him over drinks later but no longer remember his name.



## Chocolate Crack on a Stick

If you steal my idea I swear to God, well, I'll be mad at you. It's a moneymaking machine this idea, and I came up with it when I dated an actor named Christopher. He was very New England-handsome and therefore able to find work dressed as a hot revolutionary war soldier for tourists at Independence Hall. I loved seeing him in his uniform, my sexy Philadelphia hero in his tri-cornered hat, knickers, and of course his gun. I loved his gun. He would be cleaning it in the park and I would watch from behind a tree hoping to keep my gun-cleaning voyeurism a secret, but he always caught me. "There's something wrong with you," he said. "Yes and I LOVE IT" I said.

He liked that I always wanted to see the Liberty Bell. He liked it because he never met anyone who loves it as much as I do. It's one of my favorite things on Earth and I think he secretly wanted to like something, anything, as much as I do the Liberty Bell. He squeezed my shoulder lovingly in his vicarious bell love. I asked, "can you draw the bell's crack in the air?" "Yeah, sure" he said. "Okay then, do it." "There," he said, "like that." "Not even close," I said, "if you mean to actually know how such a consequential crack exists in the world you need to give it the dignity of seriously studying its character as only the character of such a crack can possess." "I don't know why I put up with you," he said. "We're talking about the crack of Liberty, Christopher, stay focused please, you have the attention span of a goldfish sometimes."

Practicing the crack in the air that day is when the million-dollar idea came to me. The crack, it's the crack of the bell that matters. If you draw the



Liberty Bell's crack on paper without the bell it's a waterway map, a chocolate stream with chocolate frogs and salamanders. "I KNOW WHAT TO DO" I said, "I'll create chocolate treats in the shape of the crack, sell them on a stick, a chocolate crack on a stick! I'll sell them outside the Liberty Bell on a table and call out CHOCOLATE LIBERTY CRACK ON A STICK, GET YOUR CHOCOLATE LIBERTY CRACK ON A STICK, like the poet Gil Ott when he first moved to Philadelphia taking his magazine PAPER AIR out to the corner yelling PAPER AIR PAPER AIR GET YOURS NOW. And then one day a wealthy candy factory owner will be in town with his children and they'll love my chocolate cracks and he'll take me on board. And then we'll have different kinds of chocolate cracks, ones with crushed nuts sprinkled on the crack, or peanut butter injected cracks, cinnamon dusted cracks, delicious DELICIOUS CHOCOLATE LIBERTY CRACKS! It will make millions," I said excitedly! "Well what do you think of my new idea?" He shrugged and said "I like how crazy your ideas are, but it's not a good one this one." "I don't know why I put up with you," I said.

Philadelphia is where you move to when you love the Liberty Bell. It's the reason I'm here and only the National Park security guards have seen it more than I have. You would think after years of seeing me standing at the velvet ropes to gaze at the bell's crack that we would be on familiar terms but the guards always act like I'm al Qaeda. "He's on his way in again," they say into their radios as though I can't hear them. The bell needs more than Taser guns, rubber bullets and paranoia to protect it; it needs liberty in the best sense of the definition. Liberty is a serious word, born from too many examples of tyranny, "The state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views." If we U. S. Americans are going to actually enjoy the freedom we boast to the world about having, then we should be giving the bell a place of openness.



I've most definitely seen the bell more times than anyone alive who is not being paid to be there everyday, and there is a performance idea I'm getting down onto paper, one where I fill the crack of the bell with rich dark chocolate, then eat it out from the bottom up, give it a good tongue licking to get every delicious bit of chocolate. Then I would walk around to the tourists and hand out leaflets on safe sex. This could be a terrific project. Or maybe the other project would be about what happens when I submit the paperwork for the proposal, the project about the project. The project about the official National Park Headquarters reacting to the proposed project I already know they won't let me do. Write the president, that's what I'll do, I mean if it's okay to drop bombs on unsuspecting families in Afghanistan and Pakistan, what in the hell could be the problem with allowing me to eat out the Liberty Bell of its chocolate filled crack? To be "free within society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views." It's important that I'm ready to answer the National Park Headquarters when they ask if my project is a way of life, a behavior, or a political view. I'm not sure which it is, but I'll be ready for them!

When I stand in front of the bell I have so many ideas. It's like a magic idea factory. For instance one day I was standing near tourists with their tiny American flags posing for pictures with the bell when I thought, HEY I want to work in a laboratory doing research on high-powered soul-matter transference lampshades. Not lampshades that cure cancer or AIDS but lampshades that extract some of the creative powers from artists to perforate the armor of those believing themselves undeserving of the Muse's unction. The light through the lampshade that can sell everyone to themselves, light where we finally get it, we get it that it's of magnificent importance to be creative each day with something we want to do. Cancer and AIDS are going to sever us from this world no matter what, it's the



way we spend these remaining days, it's the only thing I want to matter to us. When I look at the Liberty Bell this is one of the things I like to think about, lampshade laboratories of the future of wild unleashing.

Christopher HATED that he was a faggot. I understand that, I mean why on Earth would anyone choose to be queer, it's very hard. With most families in the world it's very hard. With most governments it's very hard. With all monotheistic religions it's a terrible sin. You deserve whatever you get if you choose to be gay, you're just asking for trouble. But as far as I know no one chooses it. It's something to learn to enjoy in our own way and feel beautiful and loved whenever and however we can. I love being loved, don't you? Of course you do, and we all want to thrive in that love and we should do so whenever possible! When we were together I was the only one with the patience for Christopher's hard shell and it's because I got it, that disappointment in yourself that the family who loved you flipped the switch off when you told them you're a faggot, and it was never going to switch back on again. There are a few faggots and dykes who are lucky enough to have understanding families, but for the rest of us we tenderly fill those dark spaces in one another the best we can.

I decided to make his brooding cold sadness sexy, as much as for me as for him, and it was a dark and lovely task I made for myself. After sex he was always perkier and jovial, and that satisfied me very much knowing I was doing something good for the world. He was always going to New York to try out for plays, and once for a musical. He never got called back, and I knew he was secretly upset that he might be a failure at the only thing he really wanted to do. One day I brought us lunch while he was cleaning his gun and he didn't look up, his brow furrowed with anger. "Hey hot stuff" I said, "what's the matter?" "What's the matter is you pissed off the Benjamin Franklin impersonator again, why can't you



leave that guy alone!” “Look,” I said, “all I did was point out that he was getting Franklin wrong.” Christopher looked up, “yeah well he’s a mean old bastard and he’s giving me shit because he sees us hanging out together and now refers to you as my girlfriend.” “I don’t care what he calls me,” I said, “he has no fucking clue how to play the role of Benjamin Franklin, I mean just because he looks like him and dresses like him doesn’t mean he GETS Franklin!” “But nobody cares,” he said, “people come from Tokyo, Paris, Buenos Ares, and they want their picture taken with him, that’s it, that’s all they want and he doesn’t need to do anything else.” “Well,” I said, “all I told him was that Franklin wasn’t a goofy buffoon the way he portrays him, Franklin was a GENIUS, and a Lady’s man, he liked beer, he LOVED LIFE, c’mon, he invented the swim flippers as a teenager, he invented the glass harmonica which is the most extraordinary sounding musical instrument ever invented, AND he charmed the French and that’s not easy to do no matter what century you’re talking about!” “Would you please leave the old man alone, when he gets on your bad side he makes your life fucking miserable and I don’t like being in his gun sights frankly.” “Well I think it’s a disgrace,” I said, “to take the only decent founding father we have and turn him into a bumbling goofball, but I’ll stop it, for you I’ll stop it, I’m sorry.” “Thank you, please leave him alone, he hates you.” “Well the real Benjamin Franklin wouldn’t hate me, he would like me very much, and you, he would like us both, and give us some beer and ask us to get naked for a proper ménage a trois the way they taught him in Paris.” Finally Christopher smiled, “I’m not sure why,” he said, “but I do love you.” “Well you better,” I said, “I’m your boyfriend, I’m the man you’re supposed to love and you know what I think is that our odious Benjamin Franklin fake wants to fuck you.” “STOP IT, no he does not!” “Oh yeah, yeah he does.” “Do you think I should fuck him?” “I think you should fuck him, OH YES, his asshole needs to be loosened up, Christopher my man, that opening is as small as a sesame seed.”



Most bells are in buildings, you go to the buildings to see the famous church or playhouse and the bell there is the bell that is there, nothing more, and no one cares about the bell. The Liberty Bell is one of the only bells with a building no one goes to see. Who goes to see the Liberty Bell's building? It was built to house the bell, nothing more and we don't care about the building, we don't even remember it. It's the bell, it's all about the Liberty Bell and you know as well as I do that when you go to see it you're going through security, having your bag checked, being frisked, waiting in line, and walking the long corridor of short films and giant placards filled with historical trivia because it's for the crack. You're there for the finale at the end of the frisking, and that finale is called the crack. No one ever goes to the Liberty Bell to avoid seeing the crack. Millions of people come to Philadelphia each year to see the bell and I bet you not one of them ever averted their eyes from its delicious crack! Not one of them I tell you! Who would do that? Why would you look away from it, you WANT to see it, you know you do, c'mon now! It's a beautiful crack, look at it with me a second, okay a few minutes more. See in there, it's a portal into another dimension if we stare long enough. If we were allowed to get closer, touch it, we might just discover it's an oracle, a sleeping oracle that's been waiting for us to waken its divinatory powers.

Early one morning after park rangers finished a tour of the bell twenty-six-year-old Mitchell Guilliatt jumped over the velvet ropes and hit it five times with a hammer. Ringing out to the four directions and with one more for the spirit head. JUST BEAUTIFUL I remember thinking that day, wishing I had been there to witness this prophetic act of ringing out liberty. Tourists being interviewed said they were stunned, "I WAS STUNNED I WAS SO STUNNED OH MY GOD" they said. "SHUT UP" I thought, "you are going to remember Mitchell Guilliatt for the rest of your lives, and you HEARD the ringing, you got to HEAR it and



you have Mitchell to thank!” He was tackled by security as he yelled out, “I didn’t do anything violent!” I believe this former high school football captain, I really do. I was the only one in Philadelphia who believed him and I was defending him everywhere I went. I was on the verge of making tee shirts with his picture and the words “MITCHELL GUILLIATT WOKE THE ORACLE,” but when I realized I would be the only one to ever wear the shirt I scrapped the whole idea. It’s lonely being the only person in the world on one side of an argument, but I didn’t mind. I held my own at Dirty Frank’s Bar and wherever I met those calling out for justice to have poor Mitchell locked away forever. My good friend Frank Sherlock didn’t agree with me, but I think he liked that I was willing to champion the drifter from Nebraska with a mighty hammer. The federal magistrate charged Mitchell with “causing damage to an archaeological resource.” Resource is a word derived from Old French, meaning, “rise again, recover.” Awaken the oracle, AWAKEN THE ORACLE! For weeks we peered through the glass to see if we could see his hammer marks. We never were sure, I mean it’s a broken old bell.

Christopher called very excited and told me to meet him by the Commodore Barry statue behind Independence Hall. I did, and he held my hand to tell me he got a role in a play he loved and it was to be directed by a director he admires and we were both so happy! It was a fantastic day! We talked about me bringing all our friends to New York for opening night and where we would go to eat afterwards and how much his life was about to change, and it was the best news I had ever heard about someone I loved. I asked if he could tell the director about my idea for a daytime television soap opera where all the actors are terrified of squid except one little girl they all turn to when their squid fear is too much. Each episode would have the squid terror rise and rise between various sexual dramas in the script and the little girl would laugh and bring them back down with



a sigh. She would have a dried squid with red and gold glitter glued to its head that she would pull out of a pocket and wave into the camera as the end-credits rolled each day. "Yeah, maybe," he said, "but promise me if you visit me during rehearsals that you won't talk to him about this until the show is on stage." "Okay," I said, "and now it's time to celebrate your first real job as an actor!" "Okay," he said, "what should we do?" "Let's sneak into the Liberty Bell's building tonight and have sex against it, what do you think?" "NO, we can't do that!" "Oh come on," I said. "NO," he said, "there are security cameras in there since that crazy Mitchell guy hit it with a hammer." "He's not crazy, he's a prophet!" "Fine, I know you think that, but it's still not possible, forget it." "Okay then," I said, "how about Independence Hall, we could have sex where John Hancock signed his name!" "NO WAY, that place is like Fort Knox in there." "Hmm well then," I said, "how about Betsy Ross's house?" Christopher paused, thinking, then said, "let me check it out and I'll call you later this afternoon." We kissed at the foot of the Commodore Barry statue. The big dumb Benjamin Franklin impersonator saw us, shook his head in disgust and I gave him the finger while lip-locked, I mean why would Christopher care, he was leaving this stupid job tomorrow to become a real actor.

In the 1970's a naked hippy ran through Independence Hall and right past the Liberty Bell, and that sounds glorious to my ears. When I heard about this I thought to myself it might have been the first naked human being the bell ever saw. "So THAT'S what they look like without their soft fabric shells!" Streaking is something hippies do when they have a certain amount of sunshine and marijuana, and normal citizens like to complain about these celebratory acts, but they don't look away either, and they point at the television news seeing the naked hippies running with their private parts blurred out, and they yell "THAT'S SICK, SICK



FUCKING HIPPIES!” But they don’t look away either. This hippy had a lot of sunshine and pot and was happy and took off his clothes and ran past the Liberty Bell, but a Philadelphia police officer shot him. The cop said he thought he might have a concealed weapon, now how stupid is that? The police commissioner at the time was Frank Rizzo, and he defended the officer, of course, but I’m sad that liberty is such a foreign thing in America. Is it really threatening to anyone to have a naked hippy take a bong hit and run down the lawns of Independence Hall with his arms held to the sky singing songs from Jesus Christ Superstar? What a bunch of bullshit, shooting streaking hippies with impunity! I mean yeah they’re annoying, stinky, nobody likes a hippy unless you’re another hippy, always mooching food and whatever else you have, but there’s no reason to shoot them! I was appalled by this story. The Liberty Bell got to see firsthand one sunny day in the psychedelic 1970’s that the human species is forbidden to go outdoors without their soft fabric shells, punishable on the spot with bullets apparently.

When Christopher called all he said was to get over to the Betsy Ross house on the double. I biked there in ten minutes, nearly crashing into buses trees and a pizza deliveryman. “Wow,” I said stepping into her parlor, “you’re ready to be a bad boy tonight aren’t you?” Her bedroom was uncomfortable, but this was celebratory and we were going to have fun no matter what! If you’re going to have sex on a national monument it might as well be someplace with a bed, not Mount Rushmore or Plymouth Rock. Her bed was okay but I insisted when he was naked that he still wear the tri-cornered hat. “Now scowl a bit,” I instructed, “yeah, nice, very hot, you look like Marianne Moore’s angry nephew!” “Whose nephew?” “I swear your ignorance of American poetry amazes me sometimes.” “Poetry is boring,” he said. “Okay” I said, laughing, “now you are going to be punished as only a poet can dish it out!” It was exciting and we were there



for almost two hours. Christopher was even perkier after sex than usual and poked around Betsy's things. Her snuffbox, glasses, then he started opening drawers and doors, and I finally asked what he was looking for? "A bra, a skirt, you know, something fun to wear." "Well I think that hat and not a stitch of clothing is something fun," I said, "now get over here!" He became worried when I mentioned how excited I was to tell everyone about having sex in Betsy Ross's house. "What are you worried about," I said, "it's not like we stained the sheets, we were careful, besides, I'm a writer, I might want to put it in an essay one day." "Well whatever you do don't use my real name, use any name but Christopher." "No problem dear," I said.



## The Obituary Show

### THE CHARACTERS:

Clifford Conrad (sexy, nervous, nerdy)

Cameraman

Mother (thin, tired)

Freya Conrad (saucy, full of passion, easily irritated, and good at YELLING)

### SETTING:

*(Television set on stage is showing The Obituary Show, Clifford Conrad's weekly, hour-long cable access program. Mother is sitting with her back to the audience, watching her son's program.)*

CLIFFORD: *(reading from papers)* Miriam Janson of Tulsa, Oklahoma, age 58, died last Thursday in hospital after a long battle with lung cancer. She will be remembered for her restaurant Tony's Taco House she opened with her late husband when they were in their early twenties. When asked if they will maintain the family business, Mrs. Janson's children said they are selling it to real estate speculators interested in building condominiums. *(looks up at camera)* My well wishes to low income families soon to be displaced in Tulsa as a result of Mrs. Janson's greedy children.

*(reading from papers)* Bernard Richards of Chicago, Illinois, age 62, died last Friday at home surrounded by family and friends after a battle with brain cancer. His wife Natalie, and their four children are asking for donations to the Cancer Institute of Chicago in place of flowers. *(looks up at camera)* It's interesting how many of the women who die alone in hospitals, while the men are at home, surrounded by loved ones.



*(reading from papers)* Cecily Anderson of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, age 34, died last Friday in hospital from pneumonia and other AIDS-related complications. *(looks up at camera)* It is imperative we embolden ourselves with the knowledge of our limited access to days. We are all going to die. We should be suspicious of every movement around us at all times. But instead of tuning our awareness we allow the murderous rapture to continue: pesticides, gamma rays, viruses, wars, carcinogen-laced snack cakes, THE LIST IS ENDLESS! Sometimes the world is so stressful, just watching the way people destroy one another for a little bit of money, or land, or power. Some days I feel hopeful that it will come to an end, this greed. I think IT'S GOT TO END! IT HAS TO! But what if it doesn't? What if it just continues? What if there is a way this murderous world can manage to keep itself a functional killer? I've been hoping for it to stop for so long that I've grown used to being hopeful. And when I realize I'm living on that hope it suddenly dies, and the panic of SEEING your face takes hold of me! I want to have hope for us again, but I can't see how to get that back, and then I wonder WHY I would even want it back! Hope was my comfort, but it's not a worthy comfort. In the end what is a worthy comfort? That's a good question for us, don't you think, and maybe if we just—

CAMERAMAN: *(heard but not seen)* ALL RIGHT SUNSHINE! WRAP IT UP!

CLIFFORD: *(caught off guard, flustered, clears his voice)* I have just been informed that our hour has come to an end. Until next week, this is Clifford Conrad, bringing you the obituaries you want to hear on Philadelphia's cable access television. Good luck, and be careful out there. *(without looking down he presses the play button on the cassette player sitting to the right of him. It plays organ music. He then folds his hands and continues looking into the camera.)*



*(Mother shuffles to the television to click it off. She is dressed in a long, loose bed dress and slippers. She is a tired, thin woman. She then shuffles to the curtain to her bedroom. Once she is out of sight the stage lights go out.)*

*(There is a pause in darkness)*

*(When the stage lights come on again they are brighter. Freya enters the stage from another curtain. She is yawning and stretching. She stands in front of a body-length mirror.)*

FREYA: *(touching her hair and breasts)* MY GOD I look like a bucket of  
FUCK! GRRRRR!

MOTHER: *(calling from her room)* FREYA?! Is that you? Are you up?

FREYA: *(continues looking in mirror)* YES!

MOTHER: *(from her room)* How was work?

FREYA: *(continues looking in mirror)* I was fired.

MOTHER: *(from her room)* FIRED!?! FREYA, WHY!?

FREYA: *(continues looking in mirror)* Oh, because I offered a man a bag  
when I saw that he was shoplifting.

MOTHER: *(from her room)* FREYA!

FREYA: *(continues looking in mirror)* I don't care Mother! I hated that  
STUPID job!

MOTHER: *(from her room)* BUT YOU KNEW HE WAS SHOPLIFTING!?



FREYA: (*walks away from mirror*) OF COURSE I KNEW! They charge too fucking much for the shit they sell, and they weren't paying me what I was worth, so why not? FUCK THEM! That guy was just trying to even things out a bit, so I said, "Here's a bag Mister, FILL IT UP!"

MOTHER: (*from her room*) I don't know what to say!

FREYA: (*walks to food table*) Then don't say anything MOTHER! As though it would make any difference what you say! Are you going to have breakfast? (*begins pouring something, moving things around on table, opening peanut butter jar, opening bread*)

MOTHER: (*from her room*) Oh, yes. Just give me a minute dear. Did you watch your brother's TV show last night?

FREYA: (*instantly annoyed and pauses from her movement at the food table*) NO! You ask me every week! You know GOD DAMNED WELL I'm not interested in watching him read the obituary columns!

MOTHER: (*from her room*) But Freya! Clifford reads newspapers from all over the country! He spends all week reading newspapers to prepare for his show!

FREYA: (*hands on her hips and facing Mother's direction*) For FUCK SAKE Mother I don't care how many newspapers he reads! Why do we ALWAYS have to argue about this!? And trust me when I say that you are THE ONLY person watching his show! (*turns back to food table*) What a gloomy pair the two of you make! Would you just come out here and have breakfast!

MOTHER: (*pulling curtain aside, walking slowly. She is suddenly very fat*) Oh, oh boy, here I am!



FREYA: MOTHER!?! NOT AGAIN! YOU PROMISED ME YOU WERE NOT GOING TO ALLOW HIM TO DO THIS AGAIN!

MOTHER: (*holding out a hand for Freya to help*) Help me to the sofa dear.

(*Freya helps Mother waddle toward sofa*)

FREYA: MOTHER!?! WHY DO YOU LET HIM DO THIS?! IT'S SICK! HE'S A GROWN MAN! YOU'RE BOTH TOO OLD TO LET HIM BACK INSIDE YOU!

(*Mother gets seated on the sofa, panting, catching her breath, holding onto her enormous stomach*)

FREYA: WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH YOU!?! WHY DO YOU ALWAYS LET HIM DO THIS!?

MOTHER: (*still catching her breath as she speaks*) It's not ALWAYS Freya, only once a year or so.

FREYA: ONLY ONCE A YEAR OR SO!?! You're not a marsupial! And even if you were you wouldn't let him jump back inside you once he's grown! HE'S 32 YEARS OLD! (*Freya bends down to Mother's crotch*) COME OUT OF THERE CLIFFORD YOU GOD DAMNED MORBID BASTARD!

MOTHER: (*puts her hands over her crotch*) Stop yelling at me down there like that!

FREYA: (*throws her hands up*) WELL THAT'S THE ONLY DOORWAY THROUGH WHICH TO YELL AT HIM AT THIS POINT NOW ISN'T IT!?! WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO!?



MOTHER: You don't need to yell! You're always yelling!

FREYA: (*yells at Mother's crotch again*) WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU CLIFFORD!?! YOU SIMPLE MINDED FREAK!

MOTHER: He's not simple minded! He's very intelligent! His intelligence is too much for him sometimes, that's all!

FREYA: ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?! DO YOU EVER LISTEN TO THE SHIT YOU SAY!?

MOTHER: What do you mean about what I say!? I was saying your brother's intelligent, and he is, he's very intelligent!

FREYA: Yeah, he looks like a real fucking genius at the moment!

MOTHER: He taught himself three foreign languages.

FREYA: OH PLEASE! So he says!

MOTHER: What?

FREYA: Have you ever heard him speak these languages?

MOTHER: Why would he speak them to me if I won't understand them?  
(*she raises a hand to make her next words more meaningful*) He LIVED in Australia for a year don't forget!

FREYA: THEY SPEAK ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA, MOTHER! And what does that have to do with him crawling inside you (*pointing at Mother*) AND YOU allowing him to do it!?



MOTHER: He needs to get away from the world once in a while. He's not like you, the world makes him very stressed!

FREYA: SO BUY HIM A BUS TICKET TO THE POCONOS! Let him relax while canoeing or walking in the woods! WHY DO I EVEN HAVE TO EXPLAIN THIS TO YOU!?

MOTHER: Please don't be sarcastic, I hate when you get sarcastic.

FREYA: Oh yes, I suppose this is an occasion for normal chit-chat! Nothing wrong HERE, nothing UNREASONABLE occurring at the moment! Maybe you would like to spread your legs by the radio so we can play Clifford SOME SOOTHING MUSIC he can nap and dream by!

MOTHER: Freya stop it!

FREYA: STOP IT!?! YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT HOW I'M ACTING AFTER YOU ALLOW MY GROWN BROTHER TO CRAWL BACK INSIDE YOU IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT!?! YOU'VE GOT NERVE!

MOTHER: Nothing I ever did was good enough for you!

FREYA: (*hands on hips.*) WHAT?! Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait! (*points at mother*) Don't you DARE try to turn this into some kind of Mother-daughter conflict between US!

MOTHER: Well we never see eye-to-eye you and I.

FREYA: MOTHER! I'm not the problem here! I'm not the one who crawled in through your TWAT last night (*poking Mother's belly*) and is camped out inside you right now! (*bends to Mother's crotch*) COME OUT OF THERE YOU SELFISH MISREABLE JERK!



MOTHER: STOP IT! STOP IT! Freya, have some compassion, please, have a little compassion! Your brother isn't as strong as you are.

FREYA: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?! DO YOU REALIZE HOW COMPLETELY FUCKED UP THIS IS?! HOW DOES HE EVEN GET IN THERE ANYWAY?! AND HOW DO YOU DO IT?! IT'S BIZARRE, DO YOU UNDERSTAND HOW FUCKING BIZARRE YOU TWO ARE?!

MOTHER: Freya please stop shouting.

FREYA: I hate how selfish he is. And I hate how you allow it.

MOTHER: You just don't understand—

FREYA: (*interrupts and mocks Mother*) —YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!

MOTHER: (*repeats her interrupted line with emphasis*) *You just don't understand* how difficult life is for him. He lost his job the other day, and not because he didn't care like you don't care about your jobs, but because his coworkers think he's peculiar.

FREYA: Well of course he's peculiar! He has a weekly TV show where he reads obituaries for an hour! THAT CONSTITUTES AS PECULIAR!

MOTHER: I suppose he is peculiar. We all are peculiar here though.

FREYA: Yes, Mother, the whole family is odd. Listen, he can find another job, it's no big deal! (*leans to Mother's crotch*) YOU CAN GET ANOTHER JOB CLIFFORD—IT'S NO BIG DEAL FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!



MOTHER: Yes, he's finally been applying for work at the county morgue, and also with the Yost Family Funeral Home.

FREYA: WHAT!?! Mother, NO! He cannot work with the dead!

MOTHER: Why on earth not!?

FREYA: You know PERFECTLY WELL WHY NOT!

MOTHER: No I don't, why not?

FREYA: DON'T YOU GO CLAIMING AMNESIA OR SOME SUCH SHIT! I KNOW YOU KNOW! When we were kids and your sister Darlene died we went to her house for the wake and Uncle Jimmy caught Clifford alone by her coffin messing around with her pussy!

MOTHER: FREYA! He was just a LITTLE BOY THEN!

FREYA: He was THIRTEEN! And he was sticking his fingers into her—

MOTHER: (*interrupts*) —ENOUGH! Stop it!

FREYA: Fine, I'll stop it, but I'm telling you right now it's a terrible mistake having him work with the dead. Someone will catch him diddling around with someone's dead cousin or sister and that will be the end of Clifford Conrad!

MOTHER: END OF HIM! For goodness sakes what do you mean!?

FREYA: PRISON! I don't know! But he certainly won't be able to climb back inside you anymore when he's feeling BLUE, not after THAT! (*bends to Mother's crotch*) COME OUT OF THERE CLIFFORD BEFORE I REACH IN THERE AND YANK YOU OUT!



MOTHER: *(pushes her away)* YOU’LL DO NO SUCH THING! Make me a sandwich!

FREYA: *(she quickly, angrily makes a peanut butter sandwich at the food table)*  
MAKE ME A SANDWICH! *(stops and points knife at Mother)* HEY!  
LISTEN TO ME! I’m not waiting on you while he’s on vacation in there!  
DO YOU HEAR ME!?

MOTHER: I just asked for a sandwich Freya! After a day or so I get used to it.

FREYA: *(brings sandwich over on a little plate and slams it on table next to Mother)* HERE! *(turns and walks to her room)* I NEED TO GET MY OWN FUCKING APARTMENT BEFORE I LOSE MY FUCKING MIND! JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS FAMILY!?

MOTHER: *(she takes the sandwich and eats a bite of it. She continues holding it in her hands. She starts to feel Clifford moving, she moves her belly to simulate this)* OOOO! Oh my. *(she brings herself forward in her seat so Clifford’s hands can come out easier. His hands should come out palm side up.)* Oh! OOOO! My goodness Clifford! Okay, I know, I know, you’re hungry! *(she hands him the sandwich)* It’s your favorite. Chunky style. *(his hands go back inside slowly, and she moans, her moans sounding like moans of pleasure)* OOH! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!

*(LIGHTS OUT)*

THE END



(Soma)tic #103: Calling Across the Watermelon Field For You  
*Titling Yuh-Shioh Wong's Paintings*



We met in Marfa, Texas when I was on a Lannan Fellowship and Yuh-Shioh was painting in Marfa Book Company's gallery provided by Tim Johnson. Murder Prevention was how I thought of her work when watching brows soften on anyone who walked into the gallery. All who visited felt the soft penetrating light of her paintings enter us to recalibrate our tools for examining the human condition. She shows us art can provide autonomous worldviews beyond formally designed perimeters of culture, letting us be free in the internal terra incognito.

We became friends and on one trip to an ancient petroglyph cave we were looking at bite marks on cactus made by javelinas. I said, "Javelinas are made out of cactus because that's what they eat." She asked if she could name one of her paintings this. A few months later when I was on a Tripwire residency provided by David Buuck in Oakland, Yuh-Shioh invited me to her house in Berkeley to name the other paintings from the new Marfa collection.





We spent eight hours with Yuh-Shioh bringing paintings out one at a time, perched on rocks against the wall. I would meditate with cactus quartz, known as a collaboration stone, then hand it to her as I approached the painting with my deck of Dakini Oracle tarot cards, rosemary, lavender and Mercury's fennel sprig in my hair. We built the concentration, always in the room together, and I would stand with the cards close to the painting, then cut the deck nine times. Of the sixty-five cards, only five kept repeating, and I would sit at my computer to begin hammering out a block of text. The title usually appeared at the end of a text block. I would read it aloud and it always connected. For instance, "framing vapor of the departed" came at the end of a text block and Yuh-Shioh explained that this painting was created after an encounter with a ghost in the house where she was staying in Marfa. The eight hours we spent for the titling ritual was the opposite of draining as we burned Palo Santo wood chips and used Steve Halpern's DEEP THETA music as a trance vehicle. It was an honor to collaborate with an artist creating some of the most astonishing paintings I have ever felt enter me to transform me.



## FLYING KILLER ROBOTS Renaming Project

### A (Soma)tic Poetry Ritual & Resulting Poem

—for Mary Kalyna, activist, artist, and dear friend

OM is alive and well in the United States with more people than ever learning yoga and meditation. When chanted, “OM” vibrates through the body, quivering cells to attention, calming us, embracing a sympathetic frequency. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is written, “There is harmony, peace and bliss in this simple but deeply philosophical sound.” The Pentagon spends millions on research for quality language to sell us the newest, shiny products for the war machine: DRONE.

On a residency at Machine Project in Los Angeles I sat with eyes closed and chanted DRONE, DRONE, DRONE, feeling its ancient OM quiet me. After fifteen minutes I moved from a merely unflustered state to serenity. I went to the corner of Sunset and Alvarado to ask people, “Would you please join me in calling drones what they really are: Flying Killer Robots?” Some people thought I was crazy, but MOST PEOPLE wanted to talk. I asked them to chant DRONE with me to feel how war quietly infiltrates our bodies, trading common sense of justice and love for domination and annihilation. Join me in the renaming project: Flying Killer Robots. Every fifteen minutes I took notes for the poem.

I then walked to Echo Park and drew a target on my left palm with red ink. Through headphones I listened to a recording of the Israeli-American military mission “Pillar of Cloud,” a fleet of drones BUZZING over Gaza 24 hours a day, missiles whistling to their targets. With the volume turned up high I took my notes by the water’s edge. At the sound of each explosion I SCREAMED into the red target on my palm, SCREAMED while writing notes for my poem. Each explosion snuffing out lives, the red target drawn through love line, heart line, life line, chanting, screaming, writing. Chanting DRONE calmed me, but screaming with them in combat rattled me, leaving me stunned along the water. The recording is here: <http://youtu.be/REa19YjJAlg>



## EATING BOTH SIDES OF WHAT IS LEFT

more polyester leopard print blouses than leopards  
we won and keep winning it's time to  
finger the On button one more time  
leaving it for dead is a robot's way  
I'm going nowhere until they stand back up  
hastening reparations  
for mission at home  
hold this wrench  
in the midst of  
war even our  
shyness has to cease  
needle of apparatus  
pointing down  
Isis trumps  
league of  
violators  
it is She who  
puts the dead  
back together  
wrinkle near  
eye maps an  
expanding  
universe the infinite pressed inside  
my puckering asshole makes  
me the bride of poetry  
helmet and  
bird of prey encourage  
wealthy children to  
pretend all their money is  
magic while poet on the  
ship takes note of  
who is looking at the sky  
who is looking at the distant sea  
who is looking at the churning turmoil shipside



## Bee Alliance: A (Soma)tic Poetry Ritual & Resulting Poem

—for *Fred Moten*

Lavender, roses, dandelions, squash blossoms, honeysuckle, sitting by flowers is where I waited for the bees. My fingertips to their vibrating furriness, lightly brushing them, giving them some love as they tirelessly work for their queen. I have been greeting not denying my gray hairs, my wrinkling, loosening skin of my half-century vehicle of flesh. Dear Fred, I am forever seeking the strength to deserve poetry and if I do not have it some mornings I pretend I have it until I believe I have it and then I have it. I took notes for the poem.

I pressed the tip of my tongue to the back of a large bumblebee and fell into the grass with eyes closed to savor the taste. Blotches on my skin, waning sperm count, weakening eyesight, looking in the mirror, “I am made of billions of cells and we are now half way (or more than half way) through the magic of being alive together. We will leave this world while living by the strength of poems.” There is a mirror, flowers to smell, bees to pet and taste, and more notes for the poem.

Dear Fred, sometimes trees clear as I drive along rivers and I glimpse the veins of our planet pouring over boulders with green scum and fish. Anne Boyer taught me the Latin for “learn to die” and I shout to the water “DISCITE MORI! DISCITE MORI!” Bloodletting rivers of us cavort downhill in a world of distraction. Behind a Frito Lay truck, imagining the delicious Frito corn chips in boxes and crates as I pass him on the left to catch his beautiful smile.

Dear Fred, sometimes the bees out here taste like an insecticide a poet wrote the advertising jingle for. Taking notes for a poem, aging each second. Horses and new colts race past a patch of wild violets I found on a clump of



sun-warmed earth. This is when I found a hive. I could hear them at first. They must have known I was completely at ease, landing on my eyebrows and toes, dancing, but no stings. My final goal was to have sex near a hive but my boyfriend Rich backed out at the last minute. I placed an ad, "Queer seeks man for sex next to beehive." Some responders said they would have sex with me in the woods, but minus the beehive, and one said I sounded weird and he had to meet me. So I was on my own, masturbating next to the purring honeycomb. They were curious of my activity, dancing on my shoulders and thighs, but no stings. It took me five decades to have sex with bees. That's too long to wait. My notes became a poem about horses titled "Bug I Love You."



## Bug I Love You

shake it off shake memory of  
the saddle off  
to completely  
earn our boredom with gravity  
shake shake shake it off  
ambitious enough to  
rush blood in the ear  
shake it shake it off  
shake and shake  
and shake and  
suck in ribs to  
let Death pass  
fat for my  
body not  
my poems  
a day to  
prefer clouds  
reflected on the  
dark lake hearing  
nothing but  
saddleless  
galloping  
extend my right wing  
running to the edge  
then the other  
held out with  
feet lifting  
wait . . .  
this day was meant for something else  
burn the barn  
horses hate them  
fuck the barn  
fuck the rancher and his barbed wire  
shake and shake and shake and shake  
shake until memory of the saddle is off



MY FAGGOT KANSAS BLOOD  
CONFESSIONS TO THE EARTH  
A (Soma)tic Poetry Ritual & Resulting Poem  
—for Anne Boyer

In a Kansas field I spent several hours burying my feet in the soil while listening to the insects, birds and cars on the highway beyond the trees. I was born January 1<sup>st</sup> 1966 at the 838<sup>th</sup> Tactical Hospital, Forbes Air Force Base of Topeka Kansas. My mother said the doctor held me by my ankles and announced, “ANOTHER FINE SOLDIER FOR JESUS!” And I say FUCK YOU to those first words said to me! My mother ate food grown on this land when I was inside her; we drank from the same aquifer, the sky was as big as it is today. I took notes for the poem. I dug a hole and deposited shit, piss, vomit, blood, phlegm, hair, skin, fingernails, semen and tears, and in that order. I apologized for being alive.

I apologized for the animals I shot and killed to prove I could provide dinner. I apologized for having no answers on how to stop the hyper-militarized racist police on the streets of America while the racist US military is on the streets of Arab nations. I apologized for paying taxes that purchase the bullets, bombs and drones. I am a citizen of the United States my nation is guilty of war crimes. I apologized for not convincing my queer sisters and brothers that repealing *Don't Ask Don't Tell* was only putting a sympathetic face on a multi-trillion dollar military industrial complex. I apologized for not finding a way to protect Chelsea Manning. I apologized for not preventing my boyfriend Mark from moving to Tennessee where his murderers awaited. I am a citizen of the United States my nation is guilty of hate crimes. I apologized for many things for a long while then covered the hole with my offerings and took more notes for my poem.



## MY FAGGOT BLOOD ON HIS FIST

the first time  
someone sent  
Homer through  
the internet  
dot  
dot dot  
we are all  
falling in  
love while  
standing in  
line for death  
fuck this way we  
slowly adjust to suffering  
an ant finding her way home in  
the downpour  
lovers are weapons subjugating your  
heart if you smell them years after they die  
if you feel  
destroyed  
let us talk  
do  
not  
turn  
it  
off  
yet



we dreamed  
our obliteration for  
centuries then  
Hollywood said  
*This is what it will look like*  
*Or maybe this Or maybe this*  
you think it's everyone's job to  
make you feel good which  
is why we all hate you  
the disgraced hairdresser  
pours us another shot  
we will figure  
it out my friend  
the ocean is  
never far  
when you feel  
your pulse



## POWER SISSY INTERVENTION #1: Queer Bubbles

### A (Soma)tic Poetry Ritual & Resulting Poem

—for Candice Lin

I occupied a busy street corner in Asheville, North Carolina to bless children with bubbles that will make them queer. Not gay and lesbian, but QUEER! Bubbles of course do not have such powers, bubbles have only the power to be bubbles, and some parents knew that and thought the whole thing was funny and would say, “That’s cool, I will love my children no matter what.” I took notes for the poem.

But MOST parents were not happy about Queer Bubbles at all, “Ooo bubbles, look at the bubbles sweet heart, look at the pretty bubbles.” I would blow bubbles for their little hands and say, “These bubbles will assure that your child will grow up to be a healthy, happy, revolutionary Queer who will help rid the world of homophobia, misogyny, racism and other forms of stupidity.” Parents pulled away nervously, saying, “Sorry, sorry.” One mother abruptly yanked her blond son’s hand, “C’mon honey ice cream, ice cream!” The boy cried, reaching for the bubbles as she refused to look in my direction, pulling him from the queering of the bubbles. Most parents though just said “Sorry, I’m sorry,” as they walked away. I took notes for the poem.

The fear of queer will not dissolve with sorry, the apology is not acceptable, especially if their children grow up to be queer. Asheville purports to be a liberal, laid back city, but Queer Bubbles pulled the veil aside for a closer look. One man said, “Jesus loves you.” I said, “I don’t think so.” His face screwed up and he yelled “YES HE DOES!” Jesus loves the queers, isn’t that nice? And his angry messenger roams the street to tell us so. WE MUST INSIST that a redistribution of wealth always include The Love. How can we be there for one another? How can we be assured that everyone gets The Love? Notes from the ritual became a poem.



## EVERY FEEL UNFURL

I was naked  
on a mountaintop  
kissing someone  
who loved me  
people fully  
clothed two  
thousand  
feet  
below  
as crossed out as this cage I  
say I belong to no more  
the stars let me off the hook again  
this is so new I don't get it  
hear myself sing with  
a voice I do not recognize  
the best voice to happen to  
me I want it back  
each night  
there is nothing little about little lights in the sky  
now the pronunciation is perfect for another  
morning of lips performing their duty to verb  
shrouding ourselves by light of  
damage control stations of rhetoric  
lips as piglet prepared to  
be hacked apart beneath a greenery of  
mansions a mess the ambulance cannot reach  
there is nothing little about the cicada revving up while  
we think our car horns  
are so impressive



# CACONRAD & TC TOLBERT

## Saguaro Assimilations

a collaborative (Soma)tic by CAConrad & TC Tolbert

Deep inside the Saguaro forest outside Tucson we chose a saguaro cactus and chaparral shrub to sit between. Selenite crystal in the sand between us to thaw etheric blockages, we burned sage for one another, then pressed our foreheads together while holding each other's temples. We hummed low, loud, extended OM vibrations, the selenite directly under our joined heads. Then took notes.

We took turns imagining someone we had conflict with then danced around the cactus while the other took notes. The dance of conflict around the cactus combined with short, tender interactions touching between the thorns, combing hair with thorns and pulling the conflict to the surface. Then more notes.

The chaparral shrub touching the cactus was in bloom. Chaparral has been used for centuries as a deep blood cleanser, said to even rid the body of cancer. We were continuing our conflict dance, gazing into a small yellow flower with the face of the person troubling us then we would eat the flower, slowly chewing while writing.

The fourth movement was choosing a cloud. Locating it, we would think of someone we loved who died. As the cloud moved we filled ourselves with the memory of love for and from that person. We then chanted their name, chanted over and over, and then morphed that chanted name into the name of the person we are in conflict with, chanting, chanting and then writing.



## TC TOLBERT

falls in falling made (w)hole

holler make helpless the clouds chew chew  
the mouths of men too much men to be shirtless  
tied up in tongues so much the woman I was

not a day the day I did not live did not wake in me  
did not walk into waking a day I did not wander  
did not open eyes on how much my tongue did not taste  
the back of my teeth the teeth who did not touch  
who did not that day wake inside days of not waking  
how a day can live not alive in me not a day I've done  
day of not days day of did not leave did not die  
cannot find what has not been born I cannot follow  
what did not wake in me did not wish me woken  
did not know what that day would wake and would love



oh beehive here's my plastic here's my throat

how the body will reach what is  
inside and will not leave a hole  
in the air  
what will  
fill the right lung oxygen impresses  
only those with alveoli to be tickled  
location is always the easiest  
to identify requires pointing  
we can say language and we will  
not empty the hand that  
its own body down cannot hold



not a day the day I did not live    did not wake in me  
what did not wish to be my eyes    burned    and so licked  
by what would be loved    I will    I will    I saw inside  
the grass of him    prayers    goddamn body become



## MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI

### on CAConrad

CAConrad's official bio reads so:

"The son of white trash asphyxiation, CAConrad's childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He is the author of a book of essays (Soft Skull Press) as well as six collections of poetry, most recently *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books, 2014). Arielle Greenberg of American Poetry Review says of *ECODEVIANCE*, "For sheer originality, make sure to check out this wild ride of a book." And CJ Oppenheimer in Heavy Feather Review says, "[*ECODEVIANCE*] questions gender identity... And it's punk as hell about it." He is a 2015 Headlands Center For the Arts Fellow, and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Banff, Ucross, Tripwire, RADAR, and the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage. He has been commissioned to create (Soma)tic poetry rituals by the Pulitzer Foundation, Curtis School of Music, MoMA, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Wagner Institute of Science, and the ICA. Nathaniel Mackey and Myung Mi Kim chose his book *The Book of Frank* for The Gil Ott Book Award. He has collaborated with artists Zoe Struass, Candice Lin, Yuh-Shioh Wong, and many different poets. He conducts workshops on (Soma)tic Poetry and Ecopoetics."

That's an impressive list of prizes and praise and I was hoping to perhaps explain some of the shorthand therein by way of an introduction. For ten years now, Conrad has been writing (Soma)tic poetry rituals and writing poetry through the performance of these rituals, what he calls SOMATICS for short. But what is a Somatic poetry ritual you might ask? I did when



he first told me about them. Soma, according to the OED, is “The body in contrast to the mind or the soul.” Coming from the Greek word for BODY. So for example “insomnia” is a condition in which it is impossible to put one’s body into a state of sleep. If we trace SOMA through its Sanskrit root it is also the name of the intoxicating drink holding a prominent place in Vedic ritual and religion. And though I can’t recall a Somatic ritual of Conrad’s in which he must drink just such a SOMA, I imagine that he appreciates the way this second meaning places his poetry practice into a long tradition of poets as seers and prophets of a culture. So through these two roots of SOMA we might sum up that a SOMATIC poetry ritual is something like a performance of rites or a formal practice that allows the Body to become the channel for poetry.

Yesterday, as Conrad was speaking to my class, however, I noticed as I was staring at the cover of his book that there is another part of SOMATIC that we have forgotten. The TIC in SOMATIC which he separates via parentheses placed around the SOMA every time he writes (SOMA)TICS. So what is a TIC? Again, the OED helps us. A TIC is a WHIM. A capricious notion or fancy; a fantastic or freakish idea; an odd fancy. Knowing Conrad’s (SOMA)TICS quite well, It seemed to me, then, that this TIC is essential to understanding what a (SOMA)TIC is. For instance, his (Soma)tic 23, “Study for Shopping Mall Trees,” instructs the reader to “go to a shopping mall parking lot with trees and other landscaping growing between the parked cars to create this poem. Find a tree you connect with, feel it out, bark, branches, leaves. Sit on its roots to see if it wants you OFF!” Or in (Soma)tic 9 “Your Banana Word Machine,” Conrad instructs himself and other poets to:

“Lock the door and unplug the phone, kill all outside interference, you must not be interrupted because you are about to build and ignite your



banana word machine, and once it gets started it doesn't like to stop, for anyone, for any reason! You need: a banana, and pictures of parrots, boa constrictors, leopards, jaguars, banana trees, men and women carrying bananas to trucks for export, OR anything else that has to do with banana production, or wildlife or anything else native to where bananas grow. No music. No noise. If there is noise use earplugs. Strip naked and sit on the floor with your pictures, your banana, pen and paper."

So yes, as you can see, such poetry rituals use the body, but they are also filled with TICS, with comical whimsies that are dead serious and pure Conrad. I hear Conrad's particular outlandish intelligence ticking in all of them.

These Somatics that started as a way to write poems have enabled Conrad to make Poetry a holistic life practice. The recognition that Conrad has gained through the production of Somatic rituals and the writing of Somatic poetry has allowed him to live a nomadic life dedicated to the creation of poetry. Two years ago he reduced his belongings to twelve boxes stored in our friend Mary Kalyna's basement, gave up his apartment, and has driven from poetic event to poetic event. I know no other artist in our late-capitalist world who has so fully given himself over to a life of poetry. As his friend of sixteen years, I have watched his life transform through his poetry, and his poetry transform through his life. I feel privileged to know him and more than anyone he has taught me what it means to take one's art seriously while laughing all the way. I hope he changes poetry for you the way he has changed poetry for me.



## FRANK SHERLOCK

### To Jupiter! 88 Stars En Route

---

Drive your motorcycle up my ass. That was the first thing I remember coming out of CAConrad's mouth. We were both participating at a visual arts/poetry collab show at Vox Populi. He read his poem & an audience member was offended, oddly picking his toes in protest. I spent the early 90s trying to be "serious", taking orders from literary fascists about what poetry should be. CA & his two-wheeled dildo gave me my punk rock back, the permission to not ask permission.

---

My high school president may have very well won the position because his father was killed in a mob hit. Later I befriended an enforcer for the Junior Black Mafia who wreaked havoc during the Philly crack wars vs. the Jamaican Shower Posse. He kept a job on the Sears loading dock just so his grandmother thought he had a real job. Then there was the moment when I realized that CAConrad was maybe the most badass motherfucker I'd ever met.

---

When he first moved to Philadelphia, all his friends were dykes. He was known as the "lesbian purse-bearer" whenever his friends wanted to cruise on the dance floor. He wondered aloud, "Women who hang out with gay men are called fag hags. Why isn't there a term for men who hang out with all lesbians?" One friend said, "Oh listen to you, hot shot. You think we're going to invent a term just for you? You're the only one!"



---

“Toast is my favorite food on the planet!” Whaaat?

---

A handful of friends helped Conrad celebrate his 20<sup>th</sup> year in Philadelphia with a pilgrimage to the Midtown Diner where he ate his first meal in the city. The flies on the paper overhead had decomposed and were crumbling. Toast all around.

---

When he moved out west to “study herbs” (yeah, right), a Manson-esque interpretation of the Beatles’ “Get Back” convinced me that CA was headed to Arizona for what was then called “sexual reassignment” surgery. He found this ridiculous, but gave me a break since it wasn’t as dire as his other friends’ conjectures. “At least you didn’t think I was going away to die of AIDS!”

---

CA referred me to his attorney. The lawyer keeps asking me if I’m gay. I keep not answering him. He assures me that he doesn’t mind, repeatedly stating that it’s okay if I am. “I wrote my thesis on that in college.” The lawyer says, “I’m only wondering since you were referred to me by a transvestite.”

For years there were whisperings in the New York scene that CA & I were a couple. We both found it hilarious, but wondered why this story had legs for so long. One night on a bender in Brooklyn, I asked Greg Fuchs why NY poets continue to think Conrad & I are together like that. He



replied, “Because I keep telling them you are.” He shrugged his shoulders and giggled. “Who knows? Maybe. I don’t know for sure what happens in Philly.”

---

The night of Anselm Berrigan & Karen Weiser’s wedding, we saw a UFO together in Brooklyn. For some reason, no one at the after-party was interested in coming outside to see it. Maybe it was because the last of the late John Fisk’s weed was being smoked in tribute to his friendship. We loved to talk about John too, but c’mon, there was a UFO outside!

The next day at Telephone Bar, we told Alice Notley about our UFO sighting. We described it as an orange pyramid. Alice told us with absolute certainty it was NOT a UFO. She explained that UFOs are shaped like saucers. We looked at each other & asked the same question w/ our eyes, while remaining silent. “How does she know that?” we were thinking. So much was going on that wasn’t making sense & Michael Jackson was acquitted on television during our talk with Alice.

---

For as long as I knew him, poets were always jealous of Conrad. I just never understood it, since he’s the most generous writer I’ve ever met. Even weirder are the scores of haters that can’t stand me solely for my close association. I remember the first time someone hated CA because of his friendship w/ me. I remember thinking “Finally!!!”

I like to put rumors in the pipeline to spread misinformation about CA for my own amusement. The poet Adam Fieled despises Conrad for reasons I’m not quite sure about, other than the notion that CA dared to call himself



a poet w/o jumping through the appropriate hoops. I “confidentially” shared w/ Adam that Conrad was a closet heterosexual. I also let Adam in on the fictitious secret that CA was a deadbeat dad. Contrary to the narrative of escaping to Philadelphia for queer survival, it was rumored that he was running from his responsibilities as a father in Boyertown. Fieled’s jaw dropped. Sadly, Adam hasn’t spread the rumor to a soul, as far as I know. Later on, we’d see Fieled on the street as he walked toward us. I’d smile & say hello. He’d sneer at us sometimes. Other times he’d growl like an animal. And we’d laugh & laugh!

---

You’re always told you never know where your poems will end up. I don’t know quite how to describe how it feels to have your book read aloud by a trucker receiving jumper cable foreplay from Conrad. I imagine a bear out on the road somewhere, parked at a rest stop reading *Love Letter November 15* tonight & it makes me smile.

---

It’s kind of a thing when somebody saves your life. Especially when it begins with an after-work garlic delivery. Then a call to the ambulance. Then faking the funk about bringing my phantom insurance card to the hospital to make sure that I got to the best ER. Then being my go-between between me & my life-angel, that big sweet EMT dyke Lynette. Then fighting to keep me alive outside the hospital with a call to the poetry community. It’s a thing, that fierce kind of love.

Once I got out of the hospital, my dad said, “Your friend, Conrad... he’s pretty neat.” This was maybe his highest compliment, reserved for the very special few.



---

One of the great thrills in life is watching your closest friend go from dirt poor to prime-time. It's especially great when it happens because people finally notice the magick that he's been practicing for years. There was a time when we'd meet for drinks to celebrate every time we got published or were mentioned in the press. It got to a point that we just couldn't keep up. We'd be too damn drunk! Something that I might have taken for granted in hindsight is that his successes were mine and vice versa. There is & was never a question. Part of poetry is choosing family. But I must have done something right to be able to call CAConrad my brother. It's good to have a genius in the family.



## ANNE BOYER

### The Massacre of the Theoreticians at the End of the World

An important theoretician of the global everything gave a keynote address on the advantages of many decorative scented soaps and the future, about which she had written at least forty books. At the seventh slide of first's address, a second important theoretician pointed out that the first important theoretician had herself repudiated one of her own works, the one with the cobalt cover called *EIGHT THESES ON THE GLOBAL IN CAPITAL LETTERS*.

"It's Imperialist!" the second theoretician exclaimed to the first.

The first theoretician was about to answer the charge of the second, demonstrating a small and flexible scrubbing machine that can be used to clean the large intestine, when several middle aged men made themselves obvious. These were the government agents of a not-too-clear government from somewhere in the global somewhere.

"Are you one of ours?" they asked the first theoretician.

"One of whose?" she replied.

"On our side," they answered from their navy blue windbreakers, "An agent of us."

The first theoretician was by then off the stage, milling among the crowd of theoreticians. She attempted a professional expression while explaining with her eyes to the others that the world, as it had arranged itself at that moment, was not okay.



She knew a lot about the future: then the massacre began. The first theoretician was murdered, just like that, right behind a stack of lavender soaps and the display model of the intestine scrubber! The second theoretician wore a tight t-shirt, printed with something not-quite not-quite punk, which was in an instant soaked in blood. Bystander theoreticians began to fall, all slaughtered by agents of an unclear government.

I escaped by being no one in particular: this was, after all, the end of the world. And because it was the end of the world, there were a lot of outdoor music festivals. These were tough to get to. You always had to scrape up the money for a ticket and never had enough gas for the Oldsmobile. Still I kept going, even in the dust and the heat. I guess, like everyone else at the end of the world, I just needed to be around a lot of bodies.

CA Conrad was preaching at one of these festivals. Across a long crowded dirty plain of tired no-ones-in-particulars he stood on the stage, a tiny figure I could only just barely see from the great distance. A strange and hard young man, probably born in Oklahoma, asked me if what he had heard about CA Conrad was true, that there was a star that followed CA Conrad around. I told the young Oklahoman that I had heard it was actually three stars that followed CA Conrad, but I'd have to check. I looked into the sky, but only found Orion's belt, and was pretty sure that didn't follow CA Conrad around anymore than it followed any of us. Orion's belt wasn't even very near to where CA Conrad now stood and had been there long before he was born.

Then I squinted and adjusted my eyes to the distance between me and the stage where CA Conrad preached, then adjusted my eyes to the distance between me and the sky above me. Then it all became clear: it was not one



star or three that followed CA Conrad around, but an entire messy plate of stars, folded into planes like a cubist painting, mimicking also, with light, the scene of the mass of bodies below it, also mimicking the arrangement of crystals on CA Conrad's forehead.

I explained to my new friend that it was not one star, but a messy plate of stars that created a kind of multiple astral symmetry between heaven and earth around CA Conrad and it was this that followed CA Conrad as a backdrop wherever he went, but that you had to work to adjust your eyes to the distance between yourself and heaven if you wanted to see all of this for sure. It was a difficult time historically, all the theoreticians of the future dead and the rest of us chased by absolutely ordinary looking agents of unclear origins, but somehow we fit in.



## MARIANNE MORRIS

### Envy

—for CAConrad

*'If woman had desires other than 'penis-envy', this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man's image back to him—albeit inverted.'*

Luce Irigaray

Someone is bartering in the shower  
showering in the verbena  
re-arranging the pronouns  
from the plastic hammock  
no longer to be punished with attention  
but with purposive absence, and porn  
slotted in to the empty place,  
porn with its  
spoon from the kitchen  
porn with its  
fork in the mustard  
with its pencil shirt  
lasciviously  
sexist with its  
woman with a sexist face  
ruling by gavel. Why  
is no one reincarnated as a pigeon

leaping and sedition

done always from far away.  
Considering how and when we are



going to admit our love of manufacturing  
our genuine condolences re: iPhone  
our joy exchanged for mourning  
I could hold on to  
you could not pull back  
I could sully  
you could Wednesday  
et cetera, either/or  
pour  
from my garden  
of singing, a punishment  
hanging from the neck  
of a CHATTEL  
and if I say FREE  
then so what  
what happened  
is happening  
again  
song—

From the alienated companions I had thought to call hipsters  
I learn that the teenagers of today's generation  
read periods in texts as passive aggressive,  
that if someone says I'm late  
and you respond okay  
it's okay  
and if you respond okay period  
it's not okay—  
and from them again I learn to be meat  
and need a better camera  
with which to mimic the surface

beneath which I fawn with industry.



The bottom of myself drops out  
awake and charged by hashtags  
seeking to decipher the difference between actress who fucks and actress  
who does not  
between fucking for pay and representing for pay  
between actress who is paid and actress who is not  
between actress who does not fuck and stand-in who fucks for her hierarchy  
of petted morals which possess my body intimately  
can I speak of violence with body intact  
except you do not wish to hear it, will inspect me for wounds  
every other enemy's a standing manuscript  
every other manuscript who's enemy's a woman standing  
a woman photographed in the act of excusing her patriarchy  
who happens to be a woman in a suit but it doesn't matter  
it doesn't matter  
actress whose body pleases dirty-shirt man  
whom envy has bound to a couch—

Purported envy which flexes our fingers in dance of refute  
The refutation of which constitutes more fully a defence of the masculine  
The refutation of which is necessary to the love of right  
The refutation of which may be right, but not true  
May be accompanied by a recuperation of the dildo  
quartz, amethyst, rhodochrosite dildo  
pink tourmaline dildo  
shungite dildo  
laughed at yr dildo over lunch dildo  
dildo of fat art dildo of proof  
of recognition dildo  
proof that what begins specialized as medicine  
flying out of left field  
may end as daily practice  
yuppie fetish dildo



how can I envy what I can buy with my wage  
what redefines my status as sexual proletarian  
how can I buy that

I used to believe that there was really such a thing as a woman with  
no limits  
the byproduct of a broken fantasy of community, perhaps  
or just the long germination of stupidity and fixity—

The strap-on was purple, and decorated with daisies,  
how pretending to have a cock is girlish I don't recall  
to numb the threat of my having it all

I suppose

I thought it would extend the clitoris of my feeling  
into the muscle, but I was wrong—

without a daisy chain of jism to entice an ending  
the only point of a strap-on is to make someone wail  
the weapon stripped of its empathic sweetness  
is just a weapon, is this what it's like  
to be envied



## ALLISON COBB

### Drone poem

*for CAConrad and his campaign against the FKRs (flying killer robots)*

I have this good sick  
sea body to share  
come here plant  
your fork between  
our wars more  
and more last  
meals to eat one  
another til gleaming  
creatures gang  
up to watch  
our flare in the dark  
device set to sniff  
for the hot blood  
flooding our target  
-shaped skins lit  
by lasers  
from the stars  
falling down  
where we fuck  
in the fuck  
-loving grave



44 JEN COLEMAN CODE § 88  
THE CACONRAD STANDARD

(A) WAIVER In deference to CAs entrepreneurial efforts to address compelling and extraordinary environmental conditions, CA alone has been granted a special waiver from pre-emption by broader authorities to which others are subject unless they adopt standards that are identical, for the period concerned, to the CA standards authorized herewith.

→ This is how I came to  
eat an onion like an apple.



D/WOLACH

## ***Introductions* — CAConrad at The Evergreen State College, 2014**

*This document is an updated version of an Introduction of CAConrad for a talk and reading Conrad gave at The Evergreen State College, Spring 2014. The “Artist Lecture Series” was curated by Shaw Osha, and sponsored by participating courses and programs. Many thanks to Shaw, and to participating faculty, staff, and students.*

An introduction of a friend to other friends, or a poet to other poets—how to do this not *well*, but to be *good* to CA in this moment? By “good” I mean in a wider, indeed ethical sense. At least in terms of *this* introduction, (my) charge is, in some small, perhaps vividly insufficient way, to be *careful* and to be generous and loving, to be present in collaborative vulnerability, in loving thanks and *hello* and *here we are* and *here we go now*, to be “with and for” us (as Judith Butler often puts it) in strangeness, in hues of outness and the queerest of understandings and misunderstandings to come. In the wake of the amazing Miranda Mellis asking if I would like to say or write something about Conrad, the traditional constraints of that “something” are now occurring to me as not just akin to but utterly *isomorphic* to the difficulty and stakes of introducing a friend—or a stranger—to something or someone more generally. The stakes are related to *representation* and *desire*, these two troubled and often counterposed terms that nonetheless seem to permeate all utterance and thus engender the longing under the desire to be, like a good question, moment one of what Maurice Blanchot, in distinguishing rumor and some forms of propaganda from poetry, calls the “infinite conversation.” How to *carefully* co-inhabit with you, CA and friends, an infinite conversation?



If our daily introductions are, in their desire for care, hard, if not impossible, then it is far harder to *sustain* one's care—to love *over time* (and monetized time at that!) one's friends, let alone strangers. As such, it seems to me that to do the caregiving work that makes for a gesture so small as an introduction is evermore complicated when, in this case, CAConrad's friendship and collaboration, and Conrad's poetry, are themselves rituals in sustained love, and they love strangely and love hard. It is hard, then, to be reciprocal when Conrad's (sometimes sudden) care—indeed at times caregiving—in the darkest, never mind the most joyful times, for several of us inside and outside this room, has been so deep, meant so much and been gifted so lastingly to us.

I am reminded of Conrad's insistence that if we do anything, that we take seriously the "*poetry* in politics," the urgency in poetry, and that we therefore feel the urgency in and around us. The latter, this insistence, is one that I take to alert us to who, in part, CAConrad is, and what is at stake in anything we do. The alert says: "we must be present with and for one another, feeling the necessity of receiving and giving sustained care"—which is a kind of coming *to be* and also *become* with and for one another and our world, to orient ourselves to those things, and crucially to orient ourselves to those (post)human creatures that, as Conrad put it the other night to me, "we can't see but that are right in front of us." Conrad doesn't just think or write about but *seeks out* those who have been trained, or socialized to not see, or who we have been policed into avoiding, or into misunderstanding and invisibilizing those who in fact hold our world up. Conrad seeks us, invariably gives us a poetry broadside, then says "look, now it is YOUR turn!" It is in coming to know this in Conrad's poetry (and by "poetry" I mean in Conrad's being in the world), this insistence that is also resistance, that I've come to feel that Conrad's work is, among other things, a sustained love letter to those who are, or ever have been, invisibilized.

Throughout Conrad's poems there is the sense, if not the outright cry, that we realize the urgency in seeing and hearing and touching, in sensing or



feeling *newly* our world. That we sense how necessarily urgent it is to find within ourselves the familiar but also the UNFAMILIAR (and to put such a reminder in CAPS so that we will stumble over the word if rushing to catch the bus, or to get home, or to find one). Here is an invitation to perform rituals of understanding amounting to examining, sensing otherwise, what and who we can become “at home” with. “It is part of morality to not be at home in one’s home,” writes Adorno. “We can no longer see or hear. We’ve stopped sensing!” replies Conrad. “The world is your home—it is right *here!*” The imperative is to find ways to live here *and* there, and live so otherwise.

In that cry, in these beautiful poems and the rituals that come to help Conrad make many of them, there is the constant insistence of our unavoidable (and potentiating) relation to one another. In such a relation we are met with the urgency of loving hard and of understanding differently—not least so that we may take care not to oppress or subject another to the merely curious and thus normative gaze, or that ardently unthoughtful judgment, or fearful reaction, that response to muzzle our own potentially ecstatic encounters. The cry is frictive: it is to be open to that crucial moment of alteration when met with all those potentials you don’t know are there, to be loudly critical of that which contributes to shutting us off. If you hear a refrain in Conrad’s diverse work, it is because there is an intense reverb that comes with a poetry that has the courage to imagine and so facilitate multiple futures in which each of us is waking to, and so truly *hearing*, the wildest and queerest modes of expression.

It is in that vulnerability of creative expression that we find the courage, finally to speak, to speak out, to sing maybe and sing *out* and so to *be out*. Now, out and about we find in us our own resistive urges, our alien languages. Which is to find one another—there in the dark, groping about for what is right in front of us, urgently *here*, and *there*, and necessary. And so with new feelers, we are urgently and necessarily together *now*.



Of such necessity and urgency in caring for one another and our expressive potentials, Conrad writes in the introductory note to an earlier chapbook of (soma)tic poetry, *(Soma)tic Midge*, not of Conrad's own deep, sustained, and beautiful capacities for love. Conrad does no self-lauding upon recounting trying to love a broken world. Conrad writes not of the *results*, nor of what Conrad has *alone* done, but rather that care needs be taken to locate what is out there, and so out—and in—*here*. It is thus here, at this point, that I give myself over to a certain impossibility and feel gladness that Conrad has already in fact written the introduction that is the introduction I'd have wished to write, and that turns out to be the beginning of a conversation I am so grateful to say is, or feels, *infinite* in its capacity to give a shit despite ourselves. In that note we read:

"I cannot stress enough how much this mechanistic world, as it becomes more and more efficient, resulting in ever increasing brutality, has required me to FIND MY BODY to FIND MY PLANET in order to find my poetry. If I am an extension of this world then I am an extension of garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution, BUT ALSO the beauty of a patch of unspoiled sand, all that croaks from the mud, talons on the cliff that take rock and silt so seriously flying over the spectacle for a closer examination is nothing short of necessary. The most idle looking pebble will suddenly match any hunger, any rage. Suddenly, and will be realized at no other speed than suddenly."

And so please let us with Conrad begin to fly "over the spectacle" and examine (as hard as it will be) what we are an "extension of." And let us go now, as CA has, at the *speed of suddenly*.



## D/ WOLACH & ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON

### Organized Pulse<sup>1</sup>:

### A Somatic in Homage to CAConrad's (Soma)tic Poetry Rituals & PACE the Nation

*Unrest is widespread and wants to become visible.*

— PACE the Nation announcement

We live approximately 20 miles from Joint Base Lewis McCord (JBLM), the only “power projection” base west of the Rocky Mountains. It is the size of a small city. Late at night, we hear soldiers “testing” various weapons. Sometimes the sky lights up neon green. Sometimes cell phones cut out while we are driving on the highway that bisects the base. Routinely, late at night, as the birds and squirrels are asleep in the trees, we startle awake to the shredding crackle of the laser-guided Counter Rocket Artillery and Mortar (“C-RAM”) system. The C-RAM is essentially a massive Gatling gun guided by radar, sonar, and infrared targeting technology. It is a “smart” murder device that locks in on objects (which is to say, *subjects*) and “neutralizes” them. Most recently, the C-RAM has been used as part of the Israeli Defense Force’s “Iron Dome” system. It is also being used in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. “Human targets” cannot run from the C-RAM, since human targets, like the C-RAM, have a pulse: we emit heat to move and sense, we make noises to locate other noises. Unlike your noises, the C-RAM’s is unearthly: a terrible grinding pulsation, followed by a low, pulsing buzz that fades out. The louder pulsation is the air’s resistance to the spray of the huge shells; the low buzz, like a transformer blowing before the lights go, is the system powering down.

Our aim in this (soma)tic and note is to meditate on *unrest* as the *generative noise of urgency*, and on PACE the Nation’s capacity to hear such noise and make it audible to us. As we write this, CAConrad is traveling from place to place across the U.S., seeking out assemblies of poets in order to discuss “what we can do to



repair our national obsession with war.”<sup>22</sup> In so doing, CA is inviting organizing and spontaneous collaboration centered around the PACE action—which exists, one might say, in the interstices between radical organizing, live poetry reading, and magic. Etymologically, *to pace* is to measure distance using one’s embodiment; the verb is from the Latin *pandere*, to stretch, or *to spread out*. Participants in past PACE actions have spread out in neighborhoods and on streetcorners, seeking out strangers with whom to share poems, conversation, and reciprocal energies, always in relation to a specific, ongoing problem. Through this collective drift, this *organized pulse* starkly different from the sort that we hear coming from JBLM late at night, *time* and *what one values* get called into question.

For us, PACE the Nation is not just about jamming the signal of militarized violence and colonialism; it is also about co-creating new kinds of iterative, self-organizing energies—sounds, movements—that make use of the kinds of pervasive, engulfing pulses we can’t run from. As we pace and read and converse, the distance covered may be small or appear insignificant. But each step, every PACE action, amplifies and reproduces itself as participants go on to co-create other assemblies, in another time or town, as they spread out and spread word of the kind of lovingly disruptive pulse that they just helped to make happen. Perhaps this is what CA is getting at in reminding us that we are always collaborating.

In the spirit of CA’s (soma)tic rituals and in solidarity with CA’s intentionalized poetic nomadism, we want to amplify the din, the remote but no less brutal pulsations that JBLM describes euphemistically as “disturbance.”<sup>23</sup> We amplify and reiterate in our (soma)tic the sort of work that PACE does, both so that we may celebrate PACE itself and so that we may begin to track what tracks us, those organized pulses that are not poetic, that are always in and around us. In what follows we invite you to find ways to make perceptible and radically reorganize the forms of noise you can’t run from. How might we together initiate a distorted and distorting counter-pulse, a pulse that sings out of step with the nighttime beats of death machines? Out of step out of time, how does your body sense what is often so far away or hidden from view?



\* \* \*

Download and print the JBLM “Range Schedule,” a document that flirts with neighborliness by informing, and simultaneously not informing, local residents about when live munitions will be fired across the “uninhabited” range (which is in fact inhabited by many species). If there is an army base near you, by all means substitute its range schedule for this one:  
[http://www.lewis-mcchord.army.mil/files/firing\\_aug2014.pdf](http://www.lewis-mcchord.army.mil/files/firing_aug2014.pdf)

Now begin to disassemble your JBLM document. Think of what it means for PACE to reach out to you, instead of targeting you, spreading itself towards and with you. Imagine what this “Range Schedule” would sound like if it were composed for one of the PACE the Nation poets’ assemblies—i.e., for the sake of poetry. Turn as many words as possible into their opposites; reconfigure *training* as *untraining*, or perhaps as *poetry reading*. Take notes before, during, and after decomposing the JBLM document.

Once your altered document is ready, find a good time to go to your local mall. Before going, put on headphones and read the altered document to yourself once while listening to the sound of the C-RAM, available online in this training video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNaeclsG5Ww>. Turn the volume up as loud as you can. Then take this recording with you to the mall (via laptop, phone with internet, etc). Go to several stores. Just outside each, play the C-RAM recording again through your headphones with the volume as high as possible. After listening to the recording, engage strangers until at least one (for each store) stops where you are. Ask them: “Would you prefer to hear a military laser gun being fired today or a poem?” If they respond that they would like to hear a poem, read them your JBLM notes. If they choose “laser gun,” ask them if they would put your headphones on while you play them the recording. Afterwards, ask them: “How was it? What did you hear?” Once the conversation has ended, take notes (notes, notes notes!), then when ready, move on to the next store. Try to talk with at least a half dozen different people.



That night, just before you go to bed, log on to the DARPA website. DARPA is the agency founded in 1958 to “create strategic surprise” on behalf of American “security interests” ([www.darpa.mil/](http://www.darpa.mil/)). Peruse some of the site’s pages, taking copious notes. Consider how DARPA took part in developing the C-RAM (among countless other technologies of imperialism). Allow yourself to consider the sheer reach and brute force of the surveillance culture that we live in and that some of us, particularly in the U.S., have the “privilege” of taking for granted. Take notes. Leave the DARPA page open for the night, since it’s processing information about your computer (filing away your location, cross-checking watch lists) while you are on the site. Your body has become aware of itself as a receptor of highly organized electrical pulses that facilitate war. You are simultaneously tracked and counter-tracking these pulses that, at least for us living in America, are so far away that they are often hard to feel or acknowledge, even as they are outright destroying whole cultures. You are beginning to take stock of the reverberations, the energetic waves that lock on to the position of bodies, homes, and cities, in order to destroy them. You are sensing that you are not one of the targeted—perhaps. Take notes about what you are sensing. Keep taking notes as you listen, once more, to the C-RAM recording in the training video, before going to sleep.

Use all of your notes, including the “decomposed” document you made, to make your new poem.

---

<sup>1</sup> We recall this phrase, “organized pulse,” as one that comes from the work of poet and essayist Rob Halpern, and borrow it here with many thanks.

<sup>2</sup> CACONRAD founded PACE (Poet Activist Community Extension) in 2004 with Frank Sherlock, Mytili Jagannathan and Linh Dinh: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/09/caconrads-pace-the-nation-project-is-underway/>.

<sup>3</sup> Our thinking here is indebted to Fred Moten’s work, particularly “necessity, immensity, and crisis (many edges/seeing things),” *Floor Journal*, Issue 1 (October 30, 2011) and *The Feel Trio* (Letter Machine, 2014).



## RESULTING POEMS, FOR CACONRAD:

### d/wolach's draft poem ("Cul de Sac")

Incanted re-record is the default, now, the language inside us, leaked in reds and hues of neighborhood watches, dialectical infomercial desires, re-reclining choked off melee amidst bridgeless aftermaths.

They whisper illawful motions in the rooms.

They whisper strategic surprise in chambered strategy. In a rotunda in a city a drum goes off in love in rage for all for who there, not there not here, must tiptoe between the notes.

\*

Inside, cymbals fall back upon themselves, move under those unsaid things muted now, destitute now, their rapid shapes enchoral in the dimness of the sharper arc of the future

is a drone.

\*

Everywhere ecstatic bursts of mourning can be heard against the typical days of advert testimonial, status update lonesomenesses, urban garden pesticides removal, and as more tropes are sent in to parlay the grief as promised it is underreported that: *no more microwave dished up crowd dispersal needed, they are falling for whoever is within range.*



## Elizabeth Williamson's draft poem ("Power Projection")

the ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power—political, economic, informational, or military—to rapidly and effectively deploy and sustain forces in and from multiple dispersed locations to respond to crises, to contribute to deterrence, and to enhance regional stability

—United States Department of Defense. *J1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*

### I. Showing the Flag

the world unzipping  
it's a fabricated noise, a wretched light  
the digits the atoms the electrons  
sustain forces in and from  
HOW ABOUT  
don't kill and say whatever you WANT!  
mobilization and deployment activities  
maximum use of all facilities  
the horizon goes in and out of focus  
the targets are too far away to matter

### II. Compulsion/Deterrence

on top on target on point on edge  
we respond to crises  
just kidding about killing them  
kill me (that's the big secret)  
to the marsh



to the sandstorm  
to the target practice  
kill the one who  
processes the influx  
they must hate death as much as I do

### 3. Punishment

individual mobilization augmentees  
support  
the freshly  
murdered (we are fuel)  
their murderers (we are fed)  
starved to death  
strike them down  
I would kill you and eat  
reputed to be the best path to take in  
shh they're sleeping  
shh they're listening

### IV. Armed Intervention

how many war dead  
for  
where's the edge of our projection  
our port support activity  
the pain in my head seeking a pathway out  
back into their little piggy guns  
seconds ticking down  
for  
the next pair of boots  
for  
wards of the



forward state  
they won't know what hit them  
but they will know who made it  
of course of course of course of course  
death has a different  
present tense

## V. Conquest

debarkation  
not here please  
regional stability  
not on work nights please  
when you die  
on someone else's night please  
peacetime operational structure  
    when you die  
high priority active component  
    when you die  
prepare for the next potential occupants

source texts:

CAConrad, *Ecodeviance*

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/ppp.htm>



## ERICA KAUFMAN

### soma(tic) series

#### 1

i think a lot about minerals and the way they make the water feel hard although i wouldn't label it hard if not for the way my hair looks in the morning.

i think a lot about what you might say if i was forthcoming but i don't seem to have the ability to be forthcoming so i think a lot about the *what if* situation.

i do a lot of my finest thinking in the shower, as the water first hits my chest, first scalding then adjusted, then full of a certain level of unrest.

in berlin i couldn't figure out how to make myself. rather, how to make myself in the morning, the shower head really a bathtub, the water heavy and thick. i never thought of myself as soft in the water kind of genre, and i never thought of myself as the kind of person who might live for weeks away.

i wanted to figure out a way to create and partake in some kind of soma(tic) involving the stolpersteine ("stumbling blocks"). these are small stones, the size of a square of pavement, a single cobblestone in the midst of a cobblestone street, that are set into the sidewalk in front of places where victims of the holocaust once lived.<sup>1</sup> the stones all read, "here lived..." followed by the person's name, date, place of death. i noticed my first stone on grosse hamburger strasse 26, outside of what is now known as the oldest jewish cemetery in berlin. i felt more moved by the stolpersteine than i did by any of the memorials i visited in germany. and, this made me feel uncomfortable.



but there was something about these tiny markers, meant to be walked on, as a way to polish them, that made me feel connected to this city that i found myself living in. i liked the idea of stumbling upon a memorial and then pausing to imagine what a building used to be. who lived there. and then i began to notice the stolpersteine everywhere, even in niederschonhausen, a part of former east berlin where i lived where it seemed as though the war hadn't quite touched the place in the same way as in mitte. it is a neighborhood. not a museum.

then i found out that these stones cost money, even if it is only \$120.

packing for this trip i decided to bring a few stones and crystals as a way to make my apartment in germany somehow like my own home. i decided to bring a small piece of rubble that i "stole" from auschwitz, one of two pieces, because conrad asked me to bring him one.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>



## 2

it used to feel easier  
to get to reading terminal market

where we could take in  
the anatomically correct chocolate

body parts and where i got my first  
tarot reading in the seating area

next to the fish market  
i like to think about that day

when belatedness was not a concern  
when i didn't have to run home

and pretend to cook dinner  
for a pretend family i want to fill

a bar room corner with balloons  
and feel good about jukeboxes

and snow globes and walking  
extra fast to sit in the quiet

car of a loud train only to realize  
that even my quiet isn't enough



### 3

can't record  
my clothes feel  
every day because  
i think too much

i hang on my body  
as if anyone notices  
here in the woods  
where i learn robin

not robin woodchuck  
beaver unicorn fox  
this denim bleeds  
me faux suiting faux

blazer rental alteration  
hunt animal print polka  
dot habitus leg cramp

peter pan collar lace  
froth there's a fox here  
with a name a skirt  
with a name like

body icon bossy  
flounce weather clumsy  
vintage maxi politic  
i hate linen

and pleather



4

i think i put  
my life in  
the freezer.  
i think i choose  
autopilot over  
pulse over  
join lock to  
locks to glass  
jaw to omni-  
dextrous. try  
feng shui sub-  
merge try  
historic suburb  
where only 67%  
are happy &  
there's too much  
trash. i want no  
garden. no ded-  
ication ceremony  
cornerstone census  
demonstrative air.  
i love my portrait  
zaftig disaster.



5

& so i learn to filter my water & my breadth my manic trigger fawning long  
for more than intercept destroy toy car phonic components & allow myself  
to feel angry in fact enraged with every rocket every fertilizer every nozzle point  
evaluation phase redeployment ponzi pillar iron drone advance fraud & who  
photograph them casual arrow system currency troubles like when i  
choose between my own or a collective voice to build a political house  
worth living worth noticing the difference between tunnel & residential  
life conversations are most valuable when questing after language  
attitudes or dogs i call myself honest if                      & only in routine



### **a note on my process**

when asked to contribute a piece for this feature on/celebration of CAConrad at first i thought i'd write something about his soma(tic) exercises. but the more i thought about it the more i thought it would be more interesting and perhaps appropriate to push myself to enact some of what Conrad actually embarks upon when creating these pieces.

i'm always interested in and taken by his commitment to pushing himself and his body to experience an "extreme present" where everything we think/touch/feel has creative vitality and is fodder for poem/poetic process.

so, i sent out the following email to a select group of friends and colleagues—some fellow poets, some completely outside of that realm, all generated by a chance perusal of my gmail contact list.

here's the email:

### **re: a favor, a call for help**

hi all,

i'm working on a piece for a publication that is celebrating CAConrad and i'm hoping that you might be able to help me with said collaboration!

i plan to write/work on this particular project for 5 consecutive days, writing from 8-10pm each day. my deadline is 6/1.

what i'm hoping you might be willing to contribute: a prompt for me to respond to, a question that engages or pushes me to deal with the body in writing (through writing), a procedure or ritual, etc.



i am basically hoping to receive things that challenge me to push myself to be more fully present in my own composing—something i often shy away from when left to my own devices.

so, if you are willing and able (i know this is coming at end of semester crazy town time), please send along language for me!

love, erica

\*\*

then i abided by these prompts for five consecutive day. one to two procedures per day.

so, many thanks to: Mary Ann Krisa, Celia Bland, Stacy Szymaszek, Rachel Levitsky, Jess Arndt, Brandon Brown, Judah Rubin.

i edited and imposed one additional constraint: each piece would occupy the body of the page in a different way.



THOM DONOVAN

**“None of us have rules, none of us have scripture”:  
CA Conrad’s *Advanced Elvis Course* and the Politics of  
Immanence<sup>1</sup>**

The stakes of CA Conrad’s work are nothing less than that of his and our freedom. The freedom of the individual to pursue their own understanding of the world; the freedom of sexual practices and specific modes of embodiment; the freedom from neoliberalism and corporatized governance. A freedom to eat, fuck, see, do, say, read, write. Especially to read and write. In his third book, *Advanced Elvis Course* (Soft Skull Press, 2009), Conrad imagines Elvis through his own antinomianism. An Elvis not proscribed by any one’s interpretation of who or what the King was, but rather made present through one’s embodiment of the lived idea of Elvis, what Conrad calls “the power of Elvis.” Writing through this power, as its instrument, I take Conrad’s *Advanced Elvis Course* as an expression of the writer’s most urgent autobiographical devotions.

Conrad compares Elvis and Jesus in his book, and is obviously not the first to do so. “The main difference between Jesus H. Christ and Elvis Aaron Presley—besides sandals and Cadillacs—is Elvis had more fun liberating his people.” (*Advanced Elvis Course*, 4) But Conrad reenvisions Judeo-Christian discourse radically through Elvis—his own and others experiences of Elvis. Reading *Advanced Elvis Course*, I cannot help thinking of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film treatments of the lives of Jesus and St. Paul, where the filmmaker relocates his subjects in contemporary contexts (in the case of his screenplay for St. Paul) and transposes his political convictions (particularly regarding his avowed Marxism) through a treatment of their biographies. I am also reminded of Conrad’s approach to Elvis watching Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Especially towards the end of the film when Jesus explains to Paul that his death on the cross and resurrection



never took place. In response, Paul says that none of this matters because it is *the idea* of Christ that people need and not in fact the biographical person. As much as the facts of Elvis' biography are a preoccupation of *Advanced Elvis Course*, I think that it is actually the idea of Elvis and the emancipatory potential of cultural expression that he represents that has attracted Conrad to him as a subject for his book.

Conrad's idea of Elvis is not Paul's idea of Jesus, and certainly not the idea of Jesus taken-up by the dominant American culture—if anything it is closer to that of the many Pentecostal Christians throughout the world. The salvation Elvis offers is not a transcendental one, but an earthly, immanent, corporeal one. Elvis, as idea, expresses the hope for a pure immanence that may liberate people from disease, sexual repression, social injustice, and oppressive ignorance. Conrad's Elvis, as an Orphic bard cum radical healer, is not so much Christ-like as actually an embodiment of what early Christians recognized as the Holy Spirit—the divine wind that blows through everyone providing them with inspiration and the power of expression. Music represents the power of this shared force because it is invisible—in the air, unenclosed—and yet potentially felt by all. Throughout Conrad's book he is led by a feeling for the *pneuma* via Elvis. “Feel Him. You'll know what I mean when you feel Him. Let your steps flow with the words to His song.” (ibid, 15) “The Delacroix exhibition came to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I wore headphones, listening to my Elvis CD, letting Elvis guide me through the 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings, letting Him feel our way from room to room.” (ibid, 79). To be led by feeling here is to undergo the necessities of spirit as they are imbedded within social relationships and the material conditions of one's body. Seemingly mystical in nature, it induces a *dérive* that leads one to unanticipated forms of knowledge and encounter.

Frederick Nietzsche once proclaimed that “every name in history is I.” One way that this declaration has been interpreted is through a diagnosis of psychosis. However, by this proclamation, whether in a fugue state or not, I believe Nietzsche referred to a set of intensities (energies or affective



structures) coextensive with historical persons and/or events. In a similar spirit, Conrad shows us that Elvis represents a series of intensities which we all have consisted of and will continue to consist of. *Every name in history is* Elvis. Elvis as the eternal return of the same; Elvis as disjunctive synthesis of the individual and the genus; Elvis as phase state, as a stage upon which history is reenacted, as singularity.

(Elvis in everyone)

my mother dropped cigarettes... rose up cigarettes  
in hand...and for...a moment....looked like Elvis...  
breathe in in in mother "What the hell are ya  
lookin' at" (my beautiful Elvis mother) [99]

By depicting Elvis as singularity, Conrad invokes a universalism that Alain Badiou recognizes in the early Christians, and especially in St. Paul. The idea of Christ, for Badiou's Paul, allowed Judaism to express an emergent form of universalism. Likewise, for Conrad, Elvis enables the universal to be expressed through the singular plural of prophetic address.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men. (*Cor. 1.9.19-22*, quoted in Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*)

The beginning of all faith must be like this: Thought silly enough by outsiders to be ignored, and in that special place left to us, we weave the most healing magic, and understand how in this



beginning, how our collective forces create an egg of warmth, a cycle of radiation that may enter any one of us at any time with a simple focus on that egg, and bend that force, and only for the good, and love. I don't even believe Elvis guides us really. To me it's something we can bend and focus with the power many of us are coming to know we have. Elvis existed on this planet for reasons far beyond the dreams of Hollywood and record promotions. Our lives after His death have grown, not as a parasitic force on His grave, no not at all, in fact, my point is that Elvis, the man, is not even who is important, but what is important is the power of Elvis that we create, for it is we who create Him, and not the other way around. (*Advanced Elvis Course*, 67)

As Paul's Christ enables a redistribution of powers—fluctuations of energy, forces born of bodies—in and among every one, Conrad's Elvis expresses the latent power of a democratic multitude fugitive from authoritarian theology and secular control. Here, sovereignty (The King) follows from *demos* (The People) as its creation, not the other way around. Power itself is sovereign—if we must resort to a model of sovereignty. This is not your parents' Elvis (well, not mine at least) but rather an Elvis for the subaltern, retrofitted for an undercommons.

In music critic Greil Marcus's book, *Dead Elvis*, Marcus shows us how Elvis has been appropriated by various cultures and has thus been translated cross-culturally throughout the world. "I don't even care if I'm the only person who believes in Elvis the way I do, though it's a comfort to have met hundreds who in fact do, people from Israel, people from Australia, from France, from Japan...." (ibid, 66). Conrad performs a similar operation to Marcus in his book, where Conrad's Elvis is heterodox, identified with LGBTQ communities, vegetarianism, and a working class/"white trash" ethos. While Elvis was neither gay or vegetarian as far as we know, Conrad's Elvis nevertheless liberates himself and others to practices that are counter-hegemonic and anti-exclusionary. Repeatedly, throughout Conrad's book,



the story of Elvis is told from the subject positions of a queer working class in particular. This retelling of Elvis' hagiography/mythology through the positions of previously un(der)represented devotees, appropriates Elvis for the other. Inasmuch as Conrad identifies as gay and hails from a working class background himself, many of the strategies of the author resemble the auto-ethnographer—a community member or group representing itself and interpreting those representations in tandem.

Conrad's Elvis, like Conrad himself, affirms the eccentric, marginal, and strange. An assumed 'center'—for instance, straightness, cisness, occidentalism, whiteness, Americanness, etc.—is dispersed less through cultural relativity or pluralist consumer habits than through an heterogeneity based upon identity in what Deleuze calls "disjunctive synthesis." Elvis, like Deleuze's and Guattari's Body Without Organs (and other figures from D/G's thought, such as the *rhizome*), is something "that may enter any one of us at any time" and yet which originates in ourselves: "it is we who create Him, and not the other way around." Which is to say, powers of expression are distributed and modulated by Elvis, yet find their ultimate source in a univocal substance. Everything created partakes of this creative, cultural expression: "God is a living presence in all of us" (ibid, 37); "If you hate another human being you're hating part of yourself." (ibid, 60) All are related and differentiated through Elvis's univocity—the fact that he evokes the One of a "closed ontology" (Badiou). No one is 'other', in fact; 'difference' is, rather, a matter of degree.

Conrad's work puts forth a genealogy of morals in the spirit of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* and Nietzsche's evaluative philosophy. This genealogy, like Spinoza's and Nietzsche's, radically calls into question the relationship between morality and law. Elvis is that which permits, and he whose only law is love. Not "love thy neighbor" or "turn the other cheek," as in Christian theology, but love for immanence itself: the affective tendencies and structures which ground a just and reasonable society; Spinoza's *socius* or Nietzsche's active affects which overcome that which is resentful,



disaggregating, and reactionary. One overcomes because their love rooted in identity exceeds their grasp. As in Melville's homosocial/erotic economy of the sea, hands "splice" hands squeezing spermaceti. Material bodies are plastic/synthetic; all flesh is 'just flesh', which is to say, the body is deterritorialized as a set of signs for (sexual) identity. Elvis, depicted in Conrad's book, is both hyper-sexualized and figured as a celibate machine; his sexuality means something different depending on the observer. Melville makes an appearance in *Advanced Elvis Course* through reference to a concert Elvis gave in which he shouted "Moby Dick" during a break between "Jailhouse Rock" and "Don't Be Cruel." Conrad reads this eruption through Melville's Hobbesianism: "Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began." (ibid, 43) Against this Hobbesianism, Elvis may be considered a many-headed hydra decrying the privatization of experience, identity, and property, and affirming the value of the stranger and the neighbor against immunity—the privilege of withdrawing one's species being from a generalized, libidinal-communal economy.

Every *one* is connected by the singularity that is Elvis: Jesus, Madame Blavatsky, Eugene Delacroix, Philadelphia drag queens, white trash lesbians, Melville, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Pagans, African animists, Hindus, vegetarians, carnivores. Another figure that recurs throughout *Advanced Elvis Course* is Benjamin Franklin (for whom an entirely different advanced course might be composed). The appearance of Franklin is important because Franklin, like Elvis, is a figure of democratic potential that opposes our current modes of governance. Conrad senses an affinity with Franklin who is marginal to the discourse of the Founding Fathers, many of whom were at odds with Franklin's comparatively anti-Puritanical and freewheeling spirit. Conrad may also feel drawn to Franklin for his rumored prowess in bed, his chronicled appetite for life, and for his sympathies with the subaltern (Native Americans in particular) (at least this is what I glean from conversations with Conrad about his admiration for Franklin). Like Elvis and Jesus, there is an *idea* of Franklin that Conrad champions. This idea is



the idea of democratic expression latent in the United States' constitution, but rarely actualized or practiced.

Conrad comes from a long line of American immanentists who we might track through any number of literary genealogies (Black Mountain College, San Francisco Renaissance, and New York School in particular) and into the practices of the most radical LGBTQ writers today, particularly practitioners whose work, to quote the title of the anthology devoted to kari edwards' life and writing, insist upon "no gender"—i.e., that gender, as a category that polices and obstructs just social practices, should be rendered aporetic through deconstruction, if not whither altogether. Conrad's Elvis is also an Elvis of Spiritualism, a movement sympathetic to counter-cultural currents and cultural marginality in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. That Elvis read Madame Blavatsky is significant not only because Blavatsky put forth a radical mystical philosophy of spiritual awareness and awakening based on self-liberation ("The way to final freedom is within thy SELF" [ibid, 96]) but because Blavatsky was herself rumored to be transgendered.

The occult has a special place in Conrad's work. But the occult is never divorced from the *actual*—which is to say, the historical, material, and real. Rather, occult practices, always of course embedded within distinct social histories, enable us to see, feel, and know the contours of reality heuristically—through experimentation, intuition, and discourse. Conrad's poetry, discursive writings, and (Soma)tic Exercises—procedural exercises that Conrad uses for conducting research about embodiment, ecology, and his cultural location—are devoted to tuning the senses and disequilibrating embodied experience in order to reorder the mind and imagination. Tarot, as a hermeneutic system and mystical practice, is essential to Conrad's poetics, a procedure, or "filter," that allows Conrad to get outside 'self'—to practice the "outside," as Robin Blaser once wrote of Jack Spicer's composition practice. Conrad's Tarot, much like Spicer's, puts one in contact with a sphere of exteriority whereby the dead and



living communicate; where, as Spicer imagines in his book of poems and letters, *After Lorca*, the dead and the living may converse with one another. Opposing a popular sense that Spicer used martians and mediumship as metaphors for composition, Conrad insists that Spicer did not use such references metaphorically, but as *literal* descriptions of his reality. Regardless, both Conrad and Spicer engage the occult in the interest of exploring their social experience, embodiment, sensuality, sexuality, and political beliefs. The dead possess and inhabit us because history is a continuum and all matter affects all other matter to lesser and greater extents. History leaves a trace, and traces never leave us. They just become muted—some more than others. Ghosts are in the air; they are in fact in our own bodies. And, as anyone can attest who has ever walked the streets of Philadelphia with Conrad, the dead are also a property of places, streets, and specific sites.

I remember hearing Conrad read for the first time in the spring of 2007. Conrad's best friend, the Philadelphia-based poet Frank Sherlock, had just recovered from a life-threatening illness, a case of meningitis that he nearly died from. It was Easter weekend and Conrad said that he did not believe in the resurrected Jesus, but that he *did* believe in the resurrected Sherlock. Conrad's comment, interjected between readings of poems that he had generated using his (Soma)tic Exercises, was powerful to me for the way that it deflated Easter's otherworldly promises of salvation and transcendence. During the poetry reading, Conrad also read a poem in which he intoned "fuck death," by which I took him to mean "forget death," but also that one should have sex with death, that death undergirds life comingling life's forces with its own. The confluence of living and dying, for Conrad, as for many gay men who grew up in the 80s and 90s, is an unforgettable reality. An unmistakable melancholy marks many of Conrad's poems, and especially those poems collected in *Deviant Propulsion* and *The Book of Frank* in which people and things that have disappeared are often underscored through their absence—longed for, missed. In many of Conrad's poems the inanimate often becomes animated by a spirit of mourning—a longing for ex-lovers as well as for the victims of sex and



gender-based crimes. Grief forms the conditions of possibility for action, communication, and affirmation. Animism conditions impossible return.

The occult and the actual meet most effectively for me in a set of constraint-based exercises Conrad has been writing for the past decade, his now highly regarded and widely utilized (Soma)tic Exercises. There is of course a long tradition of poets using procedures, constraints, and chance operations to compose their poems. Coleridge's use of opium and Baudelaire's of hashish and alcohol; the "exquisite corpse" exercises of the Surrealists; the procedures of Fluxus, Jackson Mac Low, John Cage, and many others. What distinguishes Conrad's exercises are their oddness, their queerness (both in the antiquated and contemporary sense of this term). The (Soma)tic Exercises make one aware of their bodies—and a writing process conditioned by embodiment—by estranging the body from its habitual movements and activities. The (Soma)tic Exercises, to quote Martin Heidegger, help us to experience the body as something "conspicuous." Through conspicuousness our bodies are repotentialized as a site for the imaginary and for inquiry about our surrounding worlds. We witness the world in its construction; as something built, designed for us (or not for us, as the case may be).

In 2009 I had the extraordinary pleasure of composing a (Soma)tic Exercise with Conrad. Our exercise was based on Downtown cellist Arthur Russell's masterpiece, *World of Echo* (1986). It is difficult to describe Russell's *World of Echo* for anyone who hasn't heard it before. It has a rare spiritual quality that comes from Russell's song writing, voice, and cello playing, but also from the production values of the album. For our exercise, Conrad and I decided to play Russell's album on three different stereos throughout a four-story house where Conrad was house and dog sitting. We did so for nine hours. Nine hours is a long time to do anything, and especially to listen to an album triply on repeat. Among the constraints we imposed upon ourselves, many had to do with memory: trying to forget the last line we had written before continuing; interrupting ourselves midline, then picking up with the line again. These exercises in attention and distraction I felt reflected something



essential about Russell's music. So was a certain circularity that the exercises were trying to induce amidst interruption and disjunction. We also spent much of the nine hours improvising lines with a set of books I had brought with me from New York to Philadelphia. Russell, perhaps more than any other composer I have come into contact with, understood the importance of tuning his body and his mind as instruments coeval with his cello and the other instruments he would use throughout his compositions (drum machines, guitar, tabla). Via intricate studio production techniques, many of them fortuitous, Russell gained access to the occult and otherworldly in ways similar to Conrad's use of his own body as a source of information, vision, and revelation.

I think about Conrad's occult actualities in relation to a number of contemporary practices, too many to name really. This constellation of practitioners is invested in the way the poem—and lyric poetry in particular—becomes a site of *biopolitics* (modes of governance through the management of populations and singular bodies). I think poetry owes this reinvestment to the greater prominence of queer and trans practitioners in particular among contemporary poetry communities and institutions for poetry. How, we might ask after these practitioners and Conrad in particular, can aesthetic practices rooted in the body serve social justice and sociopolitical expression, what Hannah Arendt cites after Aristotle as a life of “men in the plural”?

Reading with Julian Talamantez Brolaski years ago in Philadelphia, I heard Brolaski reclaiming the sonnet as a form for queer and transgendered bodies—asserting such a body within the frame of the pentameter; breaking this constricting framework through lapidary linguistic assertion. In Rob Halpern's interruptive, metatextual lyricism one cannot but experience the problem of “what a body can do” (Spinoza via Deleuze) in relation to “disaster capitalism” (Naomi Klein) and the US military industrial complex. What does it mean that Brandon Brown is translating Catullus and other texts through information about his and others' bodies—his co-translators?



What does it mean when translation is animated by such information? What does it mean that in the work of Robert Kocik the body becomes a site by which the English language can become decreed (his Phoneme Choir with Daria Faïn and collaborators) in the interest of nourishing commons, cultural locations where one can gather for the mutual well-being of one another? What does it mean that Kocik, Eleni Stecopoulos, David Wolach, Bhanu Kapil, Melissa Buzzeo, Brenda Iijima, and others are exploring ways that prosody promotes health and healing through a variety of formal expressions?

When I was a graduate student at SUNY-Buffalo, I recall a professor claiming that he was tired of hearing about “the body,” as though problems of embodiment were merely an exhausted academic fashion—or perhaps he was tired of the definite article “the,” as I am too? As poets and artists, problems of specific embodiment and somatic practice are ongoing so long as the body remains a site of spiritual and material oppression. Conrad’s poetry has been important to me for bringing issues of embodiment to the foreground in the past decade, and expressing them through a poet’s subtle sensibility and imagination. To attend the body more closely, undoubtedly, would liberate the world from much of what is oppressing it today. Poetry, along with dance, music, visual art, architecture, and theater, must again research the potential of bodies being among one another if we wish to draw the subject out of its impoverished and disempowered position. As Martin Luther King Jr. remarked of his activities in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “[...] we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community.” CA Conrad’s poetics, his constant blogging and interventions via social media, his various activisms, as well as his pedagogy all insist that we must continue to present our cases through an intensified engagement with our own and others’ embodiments. What is poetry’s value if not as a means of laying our cases before the conscience of the world?



The Elvis of CA Conrad's *Advanced Elvis Course* is a figure for our times for a number of reasons. Firstly, that it again raises the problem of the body—the body sexualized, the body in need of healing, the body threatened by systemic violence and oppression—as the condition of any collective enunciation. For Conrad, the vibrations of Elvis' music provide a source of freedom, as do the iconic shaking of the hips, the breath of his recorded speech, which echo a listener's own flight from repression. Secondly, Elvis is a figure who Conrad reclaims through a radical, poly-vocal, cross-cultural testament. His unique gospel, the book of Elvis, is heretical and antinomian in the ways that it tells a different story of Elvis for those who have not had an opportunity to represent their experience, whose subject positions have not adequately been recorded, those queers descended from “white trash asphyxiation” in particular. Lastly, it is urgent for its insistence that Elvis presents a singularity through which a democratic multitude might emerge newly empowered.

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was begun in 2009 and finished, if this is in fact the finished version, which I suspect it is not, in May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> And as such I am siding with Deleuze's interpretation after Pierre Klossowski, in his book, *The Logic of Sense*, where he relates Nietzsche's statement to what he call a “disjunctive synthesis” whereby “everything is brought back to a single discourse, to fluctuations of intensity, for instance, which correspond to the thought of everyone and no one.” (299)

<sup>3</sup> For a productive discussion of Conrad's and others' work in relation to “prophetic speech” see Yosefa Raz's “Prophetic Bodies and Somatic Poetics in Contemporary American Poetry,” a talk given at Ben Gurion University, December 29th, 2015.



<sup>4</sup> Sadly, many of Conrad's comments to which I refer were not properly recorded at SEGUE, though a partial recording exists at PennSound's page for the author: [https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Conrad/Conrad-CA\\_BPC-Segue\\_4-7-07.mp3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Conrad/Conrad-CA_BPC-Segue_4-7-07.mp3)

<sup>5</sup> When this past Fall I taught a course on "Occult Poetics and Sociopolitical Practice" at Virginia Commonwealth University, in the MFA program for Painting and Printmaking, I assigned Conrad's most recently published book of (Soma)tatic Exercises, *Ecodeviance: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness*. Much of my conversation with the students concerned the direct action strategies of ACT-UP activists in the 80s and early 90s, and particularly the use of the body as both a means of framing one's complicity with larger sociopolitical conflicts and systemic injustices, but also of engaging somatically—through one's observed embodiment—with those conflicts; as a way of 'bringing the war home,' as it were, into or through one's body. I am reminded of such correspondences particularly in the more visceral of Conrad's exercises, such as that in which he inserts a lubricated tube into his urethra, keeping it in place for an entire day. In such seemingly eccentric and private actions, I perceive a historical relationship between public direct action protest and the aesthetic strategies employed by artists in previous decades, especially those associated with Body, Performance, and Feminist art.

<sup>6</sup> For a fascinating account of Russell's studio sessions for *World of Echo*, see Tim Lawrence's biography of Russell, *Hold On to Your Dreams* (2009).

<sup>7</sup> To this initial list of poets made in 2009, when I first started composing this essay and was engaged with various topics around "disability" and "somatic practices" with the Bay Area-based Nonsite Collective, I would add many others, and especially those writers who would seem to be conscientiously using and interrogating their embodiment as a site of poetic composition in relation to various sociopolitical and ecological crises. The writers I identify in this paragraph were eventually given more extensive consideration in an essay composed for *Jacket 2*, "Somatic Poetics." Many of these writers, as well as myself, also took part in three symposia on the "Poetics of Healing" organized by Eleni Stecopoulos, the first in Ann Arbor, MI, the second in North Berkeley, CA, and the third in Brooklyn, NY. Since this time a number of important anthologies have appeared that have radicalized my thinking about embodiment, particularly with regards to disability and transgender/genderqueer poetics (*Beauty Is a Verb and Troubling the Line*, in particular). I have also taught a number of courses that are related to the subject of this essay: "Intense Autobiography," "The Poetics of Disability," and Withdrawals: Occult Poetics & Sociopolitical Practice." Others who have been important for my thinking about a discourse concerning specific embodiment, contemporary poetics, and sociopolitical engagement include: Ari Baniyas, Jennifer Bartlett, Dodie Bellamy, Noel Black, Anne Boyer, Stephen Boyer, David Brazil, David Buuck, Norma Cole, Michael Davidson, Jackqueline Frost, Lucas de Lima, Amber Di Pietra, Patrick Durgin, Margit Galanter, Douglas Kearney, Petra Kupperts, Sara Larsen, Dorothea Lasky, Denise Leto, Andrew Levy, Trisha Low, Dawn Lundy Martin, Fred Moten, Julie Patton, Marissa Perel, Trace Peterson, M. NourbeSe Philip, Ted Rees, Jordan Scott, Tobin Siebers, Brandon Shimoda, Oki Sogumi, Sara Jane Stoner, Cassandra Troyan, Divya Victor, Anna Vitale, Catherine Wagner, Jackie Wang, Dana Ward, Simone White, Brian Whitener, Ronaldo Wilson, and Rachel Zolf.



**JENNIFER K WOFFORD**  
five drawings

1. Byron
2. Coleridge
3. Keats
4. Shelley
5. Woodsworth





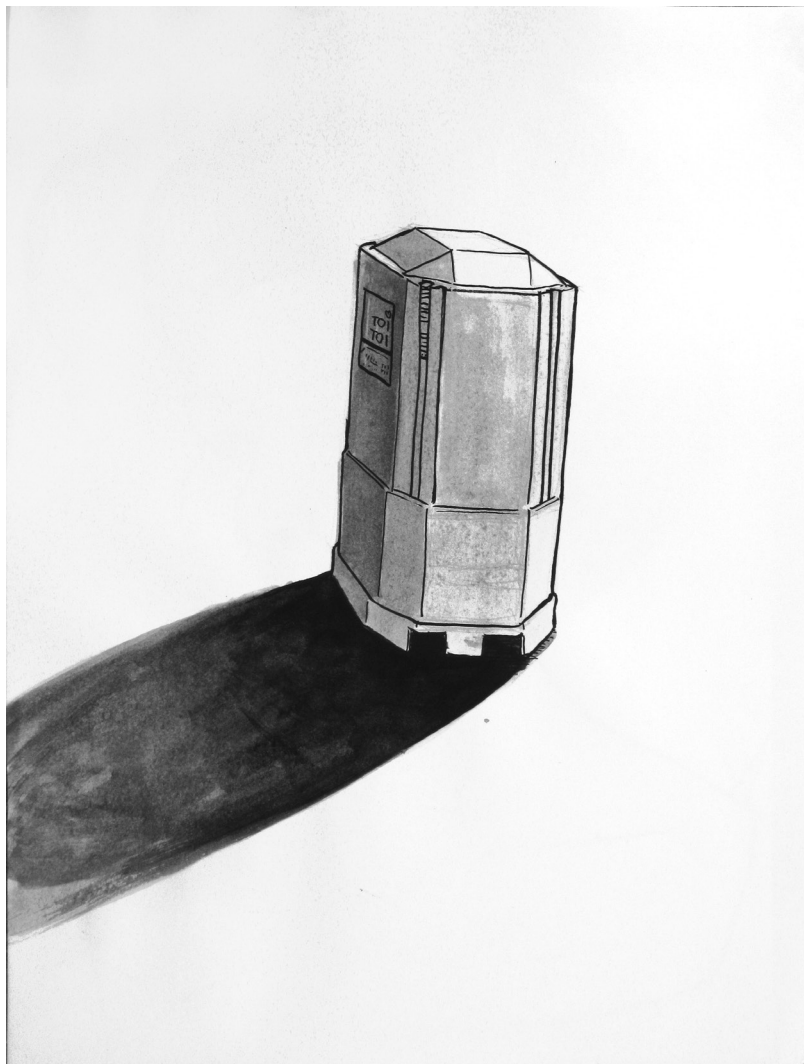




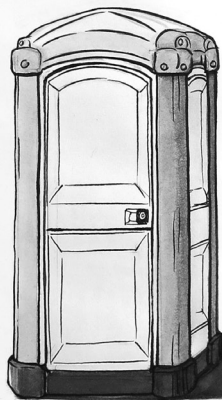














## ALICIA COHEN

Dark Ecology Journey, October 2014

*Intimacy is not feeling part of something bigger, it's coexisting in a vulnerable fragile sort of way. And intimacy is what we need in ecological awareness.*

—Timothy Morton

The Dark Ecology project is a three-year long art event centered in the Barents Region between Russia and Norway and curated by Sonic Acts from Amsterdam and Hilde Methi from Norway. The project takes its name from a key theoretical term in the work of literary theorist Timothy Morton, who was there to give the keynote address at the project's first event, an immersive "journey" from October 9 through 12, 2014 in Kirkenes and Nikel, cities that sit on the edge of the arctic circle. The curators commissioned a number of site-specific works, talks by theorists and academics working on issues related to the emerging arctic economies, and planned two electronic music concerts with performers and sound artists.

The Barents region is a border area and economic zone of cooperation between countries along the Barents Sea. Unmistakable cultural, environmental, and economic differences mark this border. Kirkenes is the seat of Norway's Barents region and it is a modest but upscale town with state of the art schools and artistic venues. In Kirkenes a new port is being planned that will accommodate an impending world of tourism, oil drilling, and massive shipping lanes. In Zapolyarny and Nikel, Russian towns an hour away, things are dilapidated and vividly soviet. There's a vibe of paranoia and threatening bureaucracy which one encounters right away entering at the immigration center. The disrepair of cities in the Russian arctic has been exacerbated by free market capitalism and, still, the factories blossom seas of pollution like they always have.



The starkness of the contrast between Norway and Russia resonates with the starkness of our historical moment. It is a starkness most notable for its blur. There is a blur happening between our many devastated human landscapes and everywhere else. We are coming to find that in fact it is not some “over there” that is being ruined by logging, industry, agriculture, nuclear waste, and cancerous development — everywhere the destruction of our lifecosystems is happening in marked and measurable ways. On the remotest islands and in the deepest parts of the sea, plastic refuse is decimating wildlife. Oceanic acidification, global warming, and plastic pollution don’t respect human boundaries.

No boundaries: DEJ sought to explore this blurry boundary of collapse by inhabiting in intimate ways, through art, a boundary zone.

Nikel and Kirkenes share much in common: here as everywhere on the globe we seem to be responding to meeting the limits of our extraction-production-dumping processes only by extracting-producing and dumping ever more massively and toxically. This horrible situation also means a kind of terrible intimacy as the poisons we create develop massive feedback loops from which none of us can extricate ourselves. Except perhaps by finding ways to recognize how intimately, inter-connectedly enmeshed we all are in this mess. There is no way out and that is the good news.

I was unsettled while making my arrangements to attend. The “journey” lasted four days and I would need to fly into a small airport in Norway’s arctic circle the day before and leave the day after or else I’d miss everything. No way of cutting things short since we’d be traveling to Russia as a group and the border crossing is complicated, iffy. As organizer Guro Vrålstad explained kindly, no, I couldn’t come late and leave early. My anxiety was humming because I had picked up on—and was already resisting—one of the key tactics of the Dark Ecology project: intimacy.



An intimacy among this group of people was part of the curatorial design by, among others, Annette Wolfsberger, Arie Altena, and Hilde Methi. And it did in fact palpably emerge over the course of the weeklong journey as we all—in our next-to-ness—encountered the landscapes, communities, and art works together and in conversation with each other. Their intimacy curation meant being up close to, effected by, wandering among, some of the most wrecked and beautiful landscapes at the heart of global capitalism's newest frontier: the arctic. We walked in a ghost forest at the edge of Nikel's 100-year old factory under a cascade of toxic air billowing into our lungs. And we went out on the fjords in Kirkenes where there seemed to be nothing but water, animals, and wild landscape but which is slated to become—beginning in a matter of weeks, not years—Norway's new oil drilling sites, ports, and global shipping lanes as the arctic snow sea disappears and opens up to exploitation.

What does it mean to be doomed? As Objectivist poet George Oppen put it in 1962, "Every ship sinks. Every calamity the hero escapes he does not escape." Everyone experiences death but (and this is, I feel, Oppen's point) many, many populations have also faced and witnessed the extinction of their world. Lakotas saw the mountains of buffalo skulls and witnessed the plains go empty. The World Wildlife Federation just announced that the earth lost half of all wildlife in the last forty years. Doom is what we hug when we come to understand that we are presently poisoning every single life support system on earth. That the world we thought we knew with seasons and predictability, with a Natural resilience that would fix itself no matter what the insult.

It isn't just that the arctic is melting and will be ice free in 10-30 years. It is also that this icy image of the world as we thought we knew it is melting. Most people experience the melt as horrifying, but the response of governments and multinationals has been positively giddy, salivating. Even sweet Norway, with its egalitarian, well-educated, and environmentally conscious populace is set to exploit their new-found access to oil drilling



sites just as the IPCC announces that if we burn the fossil fuels we have already dredged up, we will utterly doom the planet as we know it.

But we are all always already doomed. We are beings who know we will die and that everyone we love will die and that no matter how well we perfect society, in time the sun will crash into the earth. That's our context. Denying our doomed-ness doesn't help and that denial and broadly held belief that we can master our environment is connected to our desire to master happiness, which is connected to poisoning everything (really, technically poisoning the entire ecosystem of earth). Inside the death spiral we are all witnessing we might be able to accept we are doomed and that we are sad. Profoundly and deeply sad. Morton says evocatively "the apocalypse has already happened" and that hypothesis is one the DEJ sought to test. Getting cozy with the idea that "we are already dead" may be a way to begin to heal and to meaningfully shift the ways we think about being in the world and our relationship to other beings and the ecosystems in which we are inescapably enmeshed.

One key thing that happened for me over the course of the DEJ was a series of vision shifts. The art works commissioned and shown over the course of the week were all by sound artists including Signe Lidén, Raviv Ganchrow, Jana Winderen, and Espen Sommer Eide. Sound artists reorganized my arctic eyes. What looked on first viewing to be beautiful and pristine—particularly the fjords—and what seemed genteelly flourishing in Kirkenes with its nice houses and well-tended social spaces, appeared starkly different than the Russian arctic world. Like, every single car in Norway is new; there are no clunkers anywhere. In Russia I only saw only old clunkers. Everything in the Russian north seems to be falling apart: from the buildings to the roads to the mines and factories where pollution plumes visibly everywhere. In Norway everything is tidy and pollution is neatly hidden away. There are no fuming factories in Europe's biggest oil producing country. But over the course of the DEJ this perception of stark difference began to shift and blur wildly. There were things about Nikel that were so social and warm



compared to Kirkenes. And consumption of an endless stream of disposable goods was noticeably and utterly absent from social space. Since consumer consumption is driving the destruction of earth, we should celebrate this as an achievement. Walking along the many (car free) dirt side roads among a busy population who was also out walking to and fro, I began to see distinctly that here there were no consumer areas like a mall or shopping center to configure this meandering together. There were all these dogs in Nikel, too, out on their own, together, meeting dog friends and going on escapades. You could not miss the dogs so evidently socializing together (not running in packs, no, *socializing* and in a manner appropriate to a cityscape). The non-commercial ways people and animals use social space in Nikel should make green city planners swoon. There were two concerts during the DEJ, one in Norway and one in Russia. In Kirkenes it was very elegantly set up in an old factory. Only a few security guards and people working the bar were there from the surrounding community. It felt insular and removed from the public space of its occurrence. However, in Nikel the concert in a school gym was attended by about a hundred local residents. Kids aged 3 to their grandparents were there. The kids laid around on big mats and beanbags listening. Three young girls befriended me between performances and we talked a long time. They asked me, do I like Russia? Do I have kids? How old am I? They showed me photos on their phones of their friends and siblings, and we drew pictures of our pets for each other. We hugged. By the last performance all the little kids and their families had left and it was just DEJ participants and teenagers from Nikel. The teenagers engaged an active back and forth with Russian sound artist Franz Pomassl and the DEJ participants closed out the show with dancing.

But Nikel is utterly and explicitly apocalyptic at the same time it is home to the creative and amazing beings who live there. In Nikel our ecological violence is super visible whereas in Norway it is concealed. But both places are home to the doom we all face in the age of total toxification of ecosystems, the 6<sup>th</sup> great extinction, and global warming. There is no way out of any of this anymore. We cannot fix any of this mess by drilling



for more wealth. But we can begin to exploit our suffering if we do it as intimacy and coexistence. We can, as Morton argued in his keynote address, “drill down into our depression and sadness.”

Rooting more firmly and intimately with where we are, here, is the project of dark ecology. The work of acceptance is a work of enjambment—of open-ended intimacy. The icy image of Nature as we know it is melting as one of the byproducts of the undeniable loss we all now face together. This may be a good thing. The motto for the first leg of the DEJ was “Nature is part of the problem.” The idea that Nature is “over there” and needs to be protected in order to save us, is part of the problem. That’s not intimacy. That is keeping the world in which we are enmeshed and from which we are inseparable at a distance, a violent distance. Intimacy can be spacious but it means giving up the idea that there is another better world just around the corner. The idealization of Nature is married to its abject treatment. Instead of this marriage, the Dark Ecology project is creating a model for how we might get down and dirty, very intimate.



krysning/пересечение/conflux

by Signe Lidén

On the outskirts of Nikel, Russia, there are private garages. Nikel has fallen into disrepair since the fall of the Soviet Union. It seems a place frozen in a gone communist world, but it is free market capitalism that has caused the dilapidation of the town's architecture. The garages are a subdued, rich, masculinized social space where people meet and socialize. Village, wasteland, camp, artist colony. Neat and ramshackle, single small story dens arranged in long single-file lines, row after row. Freezing trash in great mounds, yet the area is well tended. Both cozy and repellent in the grey-sun morning. Each garage individually painted, many with thin metal smokestacks growing organically out the roof; a few billowing dark smoke the day we ramble through dirt alleys to a garage housing Signe Lidén's installation *krysning/пересечение/conflux*. A campfire burns outside the wooden door we all duck into. Here is a workshop with wood benches, tools, a metal car door. It's a cube of wood and cement filled with warm bodies and we, sitting there, vibrating with anticipation, became part of the medium, the speakers, for this sound art installation. Lidén uses transducers instead of speakers so that the material space of performance becomes the medium through which her recordings are played. The sounds emerge through you and you are amplified in chorus with the material space. I became an object among objects being spoken. Little wooden boxes placed throughout the garage, the metal door, the old tools and tin cans as well as our bodies huddled together in coats became the field for hearing and feeling her field recordings. To gather these recordings, she used a bow, and arrow. The arrow carried a small flute-microphone and, shot from the bow it whistled through the air landing with a pleasingly profound pluck and then hummed *as* fields of air and mine machinery. The sound recordings were made on the fells at the edge of the area's many mines. A weather



balloon attached to her backpack floated above and this collected video footage was projected on the den's white wall. When the screen blacked-out, I felt myself become sleepy with a sensation of falling—as I do when entering a dream. This is also a work of mourning, bookended with illness and death: begun with the news that a friend, a Sami shaman who had taught Lidén as a child how to do dream travels, was very sick with cancer. Days before showing the work, she heard the news that he had died. In the video footage from the weather balloon we see a divided landscape: Signe is sitting on the border between a black-grey mine and a green-stone arctic fell. The borders between death/life; mine/wilds; mineral/human; mourning/joy; dream/waking loop visibly and audibly and palpably in this space. The den opened us up to it. Here inside liminal extremes it becomes vivid how a-semantic landscapes speak and inhabit us. Here is an ancient/future polis that is mineral-animal-vegetable.



journey made by the step of  
this arrow unspectacular sound  
you move and you move and  
in the mine are you move and  
microphone of the motor of the  
machines resonates differently  
as you move and you move and

special  
reality

the space  
you are in

collecting  
recordings

mmm yeah / melancholia umm / the non nothing darkness  
/ active / stone stroking / black / the almost nothing /  
listening / long listening to look after / allowing the stone /  
and stroking the object / allowing oneself to be  
overwhelmed / by the physicality / very gently / yeah  
becoming / humble right in vast space

the landscape dense  
with meanings  
resonance frequencies

and his funeral and this dream landscape  
measure out space—>arrows and bows  
an urscene way of going to the next step where the food is

a light journey  
through complex  
territories so dense  
with meaning a fairy  
tale journey through  
the mines to side step

through no speakers  
the sound is coming

**krysning/пересечение/conflux**  
from Signe Lidén's talk Oct. 11, 2014  
"on making the work"  
with questions from the audience (*in italics*)

in the beginning a quite  
long listening to figure  
out what is this this  
Brannsetta or fire plain

where glaciers retreating  
have been making almost just  
white noise the sound of mosquitos  
metric of instances  
instants happening

it didn't we enter the dream I work  
remember very exactly I tried to  
did dream travel together this hole I did to  
waking in the mountain I saw I still  
the first day my friend's dream  
shaman ill from cancer and I did not know  
I saw a dead gap extremely warm  
I saw a dead gap extremely warm

through transducers extremely warm  
resonance frequencies metal door wooden  
bench cement ceiling iron plate drumming  
engages transducers logic of  
warm resonance is there in the garage  
the landscape is there in the garage

on the way down I got this idea of  
moving through a bow and arrow these  
travel was the way of going into these  
mines dense with resonance



**Human Thought at Earth Magnitude**  
a lecture by Timothy Morton

specifics entangle us

paradox's

basic

about

thought

's a

loop form

the form

of being

anything

logicalsystem

solarray

electromagneticshield

aurora

oilrefinery



earth magnitude  
's a  
scale for thinking  
a thing  
more distant than the Milky Way Sagittarius A (black hole)

this thing  
is human being

solar winds  
open up the concept earth to the true extent of its range  
as plasma streams mingle with earth's magnetic shield  
and make

auroras

a thought that can think the aurora's  
its weirdness opened vastness  
in us

being kicked  
entangled in hearing  
half of all animals disappeared

prove I'm not executing an algorithm  
do not collapse

wonderment

not infinite not abstract  
just really really big

strangely familiar  
familiarily strange



thinking the intimacy of  
the uterus

out of which you were born  
embodiment

not an indexical sign  
sigh the uterus is the biosphere

in one of its manifold forms  
to be real is to be a member

of a set that does not include  
you      being irreducible

in biology  
teleology's gone

ducks are not for swimming  
ducks are not for any thing

hierarchies collapse  
still, ducks and sentience

where Euclidean space begins to melt  
there are still salt crystals and people and donuts

a rigid solution to Kantian shock  
is zombie apocalypse —> turn the key in the car engine  
it is and it isn't the human

the biosphere's uncanny  
not here



Descartes sitting by the fire holding paper in his hand

*it* dawns on us  
because  
we are glued to earth

pollution stomach bacteria  
uncanny

12,000 year old dream  
hardwired into earth's surface

indigestible physical and psychic other beings within  
oneself there is no antibacterial soap to rule them

all

there is  
sadness  
in sadness  
joy's  
plasma field sweetness  
dark ecology's

shared chocolates  
fragile finitudes

nonsense is  
mandated by  
logics that exclude  
nonsense  
tricksy

a biosphere is a set of things  
that are  
not the biosphere  
frog glass of milk  
thoughts about biospheres



care is mandated  
by  
intimacy with me

nonyou is the beauty experience

where a loop form becomes obvious

me strange selves

a nonhuman

knowing that is without

me knowing knows

itself as one of the beings

it knows

loops

ur we

r weird  
here  
together  
curious



**CÉSAR MORO (1903-56)**

Vision of Moth-eaten Pianos Falling into Ruins

A man in a frock coat representing incest

Receiving congratulations from incest's hot wind

An exhausted rose supports a bird's corpse

Leaden bird where do you keep your basket of songs

And the rations for your brood of clock-like snakes

When you're done being dead you'll be a drunken compass

A halter on the bed waiting for a dying gentleman from the Pacific islands  
sailing a divine, cretinous musical turtle

You will be a mausoleum to the plague's victims or an ephemeral equilibrium  
between two trains that collide

While the plaza fills with smoke and rubbish and rains down cotton, rice,  
water, onions, and traces from highest archaeology

A gilded skillet with my mother's portrait

A park bench with three coal statues

Eight copies of paper manuscripts in German



A few days of the week made of cardboard with blue noses

Beard hairs from various presidents of the Peruvian Republic driving themselves like stone arrows into the pavement and producing a violent patriotism in people with bladder disease

You will be a tiny volcano prettier than three thirsty dogs curtsying and giving advice to each other on how to grow wheat in mothballed pianos

— previously published in *Alchemy*



## Lost from View

I will never relinquish the insolent luxury the lavish wild abandonment of  
sticks like very thin fasces hung up from ropes and battens

Saliva-like landscapes immense and with little canons made from fountain pens

The violent light reflected from the saliva

The word designating the object proposed by its antonym

The tree like a minimal lamp

The loss of mental faculties and the acquisition of dementia

The aphasic language and its intoxicating perspectives

The logoclonia the tic the rage the endless yawn

The stereotyping the long-winded thought

The stupor

The stupor of glass beads

The stupor of steam of glass of branches of coral of bronchial tubes and of  
feathers

The smooth, submarine stupor slipping pearls of fire impermeable to  
laughter like a duck's plumage right before your eyes



The stupor sloping to the left fluttering on the right of columns made of  
rags and smoke in the center behind a vertical staircase on a swing

Mouths of sugary teeth and oily tongues reborn and dying depositing  
crowns on opulent breasts bathed in honey and acidic clusters and  
variables of saliva

The stupor robbery of stars clean chickens carved into rock and terra firma  
measures the land from eyes' length

The stupor young pariah of a fortunate height

The stupor women asleep on mattresses of fruit peels crowned by thin,  
naked chains

The stupor the trains from the evening before collecting the eyes dispersed  
on the prairies when the train flies and the silence cannot follow the  
train that trembles

The stupor like a picklock breaking down mental doors being worn out by  
the watery view and the view that lost itself in the shadiness of dry wood

Velvet newts safeguard a woman's shirt as she sleeps naked in the forest and  
crosses the prairie limited by mental processes poorly defined enduring  
interrogations and responses from the loose and ferocious stone keeping  
in mind the last horse that died as dawn broke from my grandmother's  
lingerie and as my grandfather grumbled his face to the wall

The stupor of chairs fly to encounter an empty barrel covered with thin  
ivy next to the flying attic asking for the lace and the drainage for the  
irises of the first shawl while a violent woman rolls up her skirts and  
displays the image of the Virgin accompanied by triple-crowned pigs  
and bicolored bows



Midnight shaves her left shoulder on her right shoulder grows the rich  
and fowl pasture in assemblages of tiny, prophetic rams and of painted  
vitamins of fresh shady trees with teardrops and curls

Myositis and other weighty geraniums spit out their misery

The grandiose, boreal twilight of schizophrenic thought

The delirious, sublime interpretation of reality

I will never relinquish the primordial luxury of your vertiginous tumbling oh  
diamond insanity




# HERIBERTO YÉPEZ

## A Song from and to the Native Informant

### 1

[Music, Maestro!]

Don't you realize? 

You will

become 

A

cultural

broker 

What

do

you have? 

What are

you going 

To offer

us? 

A cultural broker 



Loving

Lobbying

Sounds 

Beauty is

What empire

Does 

A cultural broker!

## 2. AND NOW STOP THE MUSIC, KIDS

Because I need your attention

And I'm going to tell you

How to keep the Nezahualcoyotl dance-chant down.

I'm sorry to tell you

I may destroy myths

—said the American

Nahuatl

maestro-professor—:

Nezahualcoyotl just means

“hungry coyote”

and nothing else.

But don't

you think

—somebody

replied—



“Nezahualcoyotl”  
might have  
a spiritual  
bent  
since it means *fasting-coyote*?

“Coyote” as a symbol of someone  
using spiritual methods  
to turn himself  
into a higher kind of animal.

No, you need to  
remember  
the Aztecs  
were very much  
sardonic

And  
“Nezahualcoyotl”  
just means  
hungry coyote.

I am here  
to teach you  
Nahuatl grammar  
and not been  
caught  
in ideological stuff.

So let's avoid words



that might  
fuel  
feelings  
of  
anti  
imperial  
revolt.

### 3. THE NATIVE SITS DOWN AND KEEPS LISTENING

Take your place, dear Native Informant  
and listen carefully:  
GLOBAL  
is the new upper class!

So are you  
Good Global  
or  
Bad Global?  
That's where everything starts.

This is the criteria:  
If you live under global conditions  
But don't exhibit aesthetic signs of at least 3 GloCal-  
ifornian cultural consumptions  
then  
You are just *national*.



In order to be *GLOWBAL*  
You need to consume or work  
In two countries  
And if you're a migrant  
still think staying  
In the least cool one.

“Global” is the new  
“UNIVERSAL”.

But—as you should remember—  
There are some who are more UNIVERSAL  
Than others.

Be one of them! BE *GLOWBAL*!

Hybrid?  
Did you say hybrid?  
Hungry! You imbecile! *Hungry*, not *hybrid*!  
Global is mainly the hungry, not the starlet  
Hybrid  
Hungry! Hungry! Hungry!  
And very angry!

Desertification  
Is the main logic  
Of global market

Not the all-encompassing  
Attractive



Rich, Remixed &  
Beautiful, Sexy, Paratactic Gift  
Of Hybrid-logics

Global means those who can help my career  
Virgin Post-Modern subjects of study

And  
You are just not savage enough!  
You need to put your act together.  
Or return  
to homeland.

You, Desert Global,  
You, just  
hungry coyote.

#### 4. I NEED (THEN) AN AMERICAN VOICE (A SONG)

Can somebody  
appropriate  
me  
,  
please  
?

Kenny!

Can  
I  
be  
yourssssss? 🎵🎵



*Can I be yours?* 🎵🎵

Kenny!

Can  
I  
be  
yours? 🎵🎵

*...BEFORE*

*WE*

*GO...* 🎵🎵

**AND FINALLY 5 .**

**A SONG FOR MY MASTER. DISAPPROPRIATION IT'S CALLED** 🎵🎵

I want  
to give you  
all  
I have 🎵🎵

In my body  
there are feelings  
coming out  
of colonial times 🎵🎵

I want  
to give you  
all I have 🎵🎵

To surrender  
all the precious  
information  
I have 🎵🎵



I feel  
a pressure  
to tell all  
the treasures  
we have 🎵🎵

I become  
happy  
when your  
face  
appreciates  
all we have 🎵🎵

Because  
you are my lord  
you deserve all 🎵🎵

You have better uses  
for whatever  
we have 🎵🎵

Dis  
possession  
is in  
my  
heart 🎵🎵

Colonial feelings

is

all

I

have 🎵🎵



## KO KO THETT

### urban renewal

double or nothing, you and your hybridism  
your face needs to be lifted, the sprawl beyond  
your subconscious needs to be gentrified, the landfill  
shall be renamed goldengarbageland, dig tunnels for  
an extensive subway network for your pigeon  
commuters, the public transport in your brain should  
be integrated, a fence for hate padlocks right in front  
of the white wedding chapel, graffiti shall be encouraged  
on the inner walls of your empty chest, dog parks for dogs,  
amusement parks for amusements, child-friendly facilities  
for the parents of children who may never grow up,  
bingo halls for all ages and sexual preferences, clear the  
woods on the city's fringes for nine-hole golf courses,  
logging shall be licensed to make way for streamlined  
taxiways for international arrivals, plant garden plants  
in every department store, to age is to get less serious  
about life, to die is to be incinerated to be reincarnated,  
a multi-purpose stadium for metal concerts and the  
*vipassana* for the masses, two ivory chopsticks shall  
be contracted to conduct the people's symphony orchestra,  
a brand-new opera house to be modeled after a durian  
shall be named after our own houseman, a nine-lane  
boulevard of broken bones shall be the city's artery,  
hotbeds will be moved to the outskirts, council houses  
will be patched up with thatches, aquatic centers for those  
who will learn to splash, splash and splash, waves of all sizes  
shall be regenerated and recycled, the monument of doubt  
in the plaza shall be torn down, in its place the leaning tower



of certainty will be erected, crocodiles shall be released in  
the moat of the pentagonean presidential palace,  
all administrative quarters of your soul shall be made  
soundproof to prevent the intrusion of street noises  
mallings, walling, enthralling and everything else  
that will make your cosmopolis  
your über-capital



my generation is best

childhood past life, polio sister, measly brother, river blindness, tetanus twitch, bookworm, hookworm, head louse, earthworm, over-baked marshmallow, sunburned matchstick, the posh leech who loved to feast on ulcers, seven-year itch and whatnot warts, bliss it was playing football in the downpour with those low-income diseases isn't your generation best

in an expanding universe, we must be falling more and more apart are you still a nightmare to your quarters, have you recovered from your post-traumatic disorder, from being flogged, stripped naked and tied up to the school flagpole for spoofing your national anthem, from being jailed three years after being mistaken for a member of the diamond marble syndicate for your unhealthy long hair, didn't you also get eight months extra for being caught red-eared, listening to the stones while stoned, you were a destructive element

there was no income inequality in your days, everyone was equally poor  
no capital flight, there was no capital  
no brain drainage in the decolonizing sewage system  
the server was never down, there was no server  
student radicals wore war-paint, not business suits  
men didn't have to commit drunken suicide in *ressentiment*  
they died young for a greater cause in the anti-imperialist struggle  
women didn't have time to fight for their rights, they were  
always kept busy breastfeeding babies in the kitchen  
the government never needed to justify its policies through  
pro-government policy think-tanks to appease the west  
the state was madly prescient



when you were a lad, you said, poor prostitutes were routinely rounded up, rich ones were known as concubines or kept ladies, karaoke bars and korean soap-star lookalikes weren't rampant, race riots were routine, heroin addicts got harsh jail terms with hard labor, drug kingpins returning to the legal fold became philanthropists, the kgb antennae and the tendrils of local spies entangled, the cia weren't everywhere, brussels wasn't a bloc of eurocrats, washington wasn't a consensus

in those days, the air was still breathable, the jungles were so thick they were untreakable, you could drink from any creek or river mountains were still wholesome blocks of un-mined earth if you didn't like your government party, you could always become a maoist rebel, or be labelled a pro-american felling axe, everything was black and white, your vision was never blurred, reality didn't have to be augmented

imagine, your composers, if their fingers weren't tuned in diatonic harmonic hierarchy, would devastate a thousand john cages, your poets, if their conscience wasn't ideologically castrated, would chill a thousand allen ginsbergs to the bones, your painters, if their canvases weren't narrowly framed for the shortage of canvas and paint, would stir a thousand andy warhols to burn their life's work in frustration, your filmmakers, if their viewfinders weren't glued to moscow montage, would reduce a thousand woody allens into an insignificant heap of shame . . . and you yourself, if and only if . . .

yes, yes . . . i dig you, stop weeping . . .  
your generation is best

— from *The Burden of Being Burmese*, Zephyr Press, 2015



## STEVEN FARMER

### Medieval Remix

this emoticon out to centurions in the economica gulag.

clickbait titles scanning a load's ascension up the ravine.  
agitprop at the ascension ravine.

hotel circle a freeway brain cave terroir and region divot.

there is a dream there is the suds  
that go there. there is an i dream of jeannie hair with manzanita fries.

there is its scan load tearing a tar hole out, and when it is aubergine.

when it is normalizing its deviance in princess culture, in warrior care  
to our mingling dots city'd over particular hells to bask in.

to inexorably tickets.

to something tickets available we're in stone, brah, we're in hell.



or in steam waiting to coil out of stone the forever showcased  
georgie's steakhouse, sir george's smorgasbord donned in the singled vats.

til the forever buffeted sandlot completed gashes in each of its slots, the  
report itself data's disgrace.

even insurgents-- a fleshy mess of a sequel

even if something columbo'd.

even if only the lines having been sectioned off in the convoy something.

a something-gentrified spanning diaspora going inward in circles coming  
out tart—  
that kind of conciliation.

inviting we partake of the nose.



not much to be backed up into its broad drown at each  
frozen laugh or fiscal lipstick on a pig.

they no longer aim at appendages.

i dream of jeannie hair and mysterioso compote.



\*

frost heart spitting at party like no.

hallucination on manzanita fries barking into the rot.

when money shits out of their earlobes what to do about special brain: froyo  
stopping at each third bot, blingin and swingin that smileyface univers'd in  
a swill.

next, the lost integer mottled in scope.

shining a crack for the moonbreak of capital.

you guys have been so good.

ride el capitan ride on your misterioso flagellate



\*

unstag the clog of  
the upstick mendicant

had a place to a live-job.

where twelve thousand protesters broke bank windows  
where 28 pedestrians felt bad.

assumes work as disappearance. when brah froze into an app.

at first gaze up from shoe-gaze, stress marks of you thumbled into the mask  
to do endlessly

i can't sleeping.

sublingual talk to the groutfit.

uber-options at taco snark. wake up. live *mas*.



\*

give him the waterboard wawa and he will talk to you all night.

*basura tormentoso oscuro* clogged to light up the sky bot.

why you can't win with innovation and lights  
got govt property wet.

part of the research body and data  
are closed. colonizing the stare

to whiteness  
a reader's companion: your enemy

*lago de mierda* dropped into the mouth'd pacific maw



ormand sparkles  
as guinevere

‘our’ joke about ‘our’

jazz hands needing to be stopped

floral in batard

‘of our’



**NACHOEM M. WIJNBERG**

**If I Borrow Enough Money, the Bank Becomes my Slave**

A bank lends me money, if I don't pay it back they tell my boss he has to pay my salary to them.

But they have to leave me enough to eat and sleep and an umbrella when it's raining.

They can also empty my house, the furniture's not worth much but every little bit helps.

Every morning I go to work, if I don't start early they will soon find someone else and then no bank will lend me money while the sun shines.

My boss has given me a cat to raise as a dog.

I know it's impossible, but I've asked for a whole week—maybe the cat will get lucky, maybe I'll get lucky.

My hands around a cup of coffee before I go to work, warm-empty, cold-empty, as if hidden in the mist over a lawn.

What I get if there's no work left for me, I'm ashamed to say how little it is. Once I'm outside I count it, if they look out through the window they can watch me.

Imagine if it was so much that I had to count for hours, it gets dark and I'm still standing there.

They stay on to watch a little longer after they've finished work, but have to go home, I understand that, I could go home too and carry on counting there.

If it's short, running back straightaway won't help because they're all gone, and if I come back tomorrow I could have spend what's missing that night.

Going somewhere where it's warm enough to walk around in the daytime without any clothes on, it helps me to know that something is more there than here.



For someone like me there's work everywhere, it shouldn't take more than a week to find a job for me. Three jobs and three houses close to those jobs, I can choose one and try it for a week to see if I want to stay. At the end of the week, if I don't want to stay, I come back immediately, then it was a week's holiday.



## When it's Finished

I've lost something that's not worth much, a cap I stuffed into my coat pocket because it had stopped raining.

I must have four or five of those caps, this one was old and I could no longer wash the smell of rain out of it.

I'm good at that, if I go somewhere I leave half of what I've brought with me lying around.

I'll never learn what to take with me if someone follows me to give me what I left lying around.

That's how I know that something is too late, because I've learnt something, no one could have explained it to me beforehand.

You bring me the wallet I left in a restaurant.

The next day my wallet gets stolen and the police say it was you.

How is that possible, yesterday you came to give me what I'd left lying around, today you steal the very same thing.

Yesterday you had the day off, you say, today you're working, you're a thief. Where we can talk some more: in a room of a house that's not yours or mine or in the shade of a tree at the end of a sunny day.

Sharing a shadow with someone, when something can become like someone who has done that.

If something is being made it can't be destroyed until it's finished, a thief only steals something that's finished.

Where's it got you, you say, having been changed from a thief into someone who can ask questions and give answers?



## Politics as a Profession, says Max Weber

Poems are useless for governing the world,  
says Huang Tingjian, whose poems are miraculous when they succeed.  
If doing one thing well is better than doing another, if they are both done  
well,  
is doing something like that one better than doing something like that  
other?  
Can't I say that in fewer words?  
After all a poem shouldn't be wasteful.  
But now I come to the more important problem:  
settling for something that is like that better one because it is like that better  
one?  
Now and then I act as if I can do something well, says Su Dongpo,  
like something I need to start over again at once.



## GHAYATH ALMADHOUN

### Details

Do you know why people die when they are pierced by a bullet?  
Because 70% of the human body is made up of water  
Just as if you made a hole in a water tank.

Was it a random clash dancing at the head of the alley when I passed  
Or was there a sniper watching me and counting my final steps?

Was it a stray bullet  
Or was I a stray man even though I'm a third of a century old?

Is it friendly fire?  
How can it be  
When I've never made friends with fire in my life?

Do you think I got in the way of the bullet  
Or it got in my way?  
So how am I supposed to know when it's passing and which way it will go?

Is an encounter with a bullet considered a crash in the conventional sense  
Like what happens between two cars?  
Will my body and my hard bones smash its ribs too



And cause its death?  
Or will it survive?

Did it try to avoid me?  
Was my body soft?  
And did this little thing as small as a mulberry feel female in my maleness?

The sniper aimed at me without bothering to find out that I'm allergic to snipers' bullets  
And it's an allergy of a most serious kind, and can be fatal.

The sniper didn't ask my permission before he fired, an obvious example of the lack of civility that has become all too common these days.

I was exploring the difference between revolution and war when a bullet passed through my body, and extinguished a torch lit by a primary school teacher from Syria acting in cooperation with a Palestinian refugee who had paid with his land to solve anti-Semitism in Europe and been forced to emigrate to a place where he met a woman who was like memories.

It was a wonderful feeling, like eating an ice cream in winter, or having unprotected sex with a woman you don't know in a city you don't know under the influence of cocaine, or...

A passerby tells me half of what he wants to tell me so I believe him then we stab each other like two lovers, a woman beckons to me to follow her so I do and we have a child who looks like betrayal, a sniper kills me so I die,



the sky falls on the passersby so the tourists flee, the sky falls on the passersby and my heart doesn't flee, the sky falls upwards so a poet commits collective suicide in his room even though he was alone that evening.

That evening oblivion attacked me unawares, so I bought the memory of a soldier who hadn't returned from war, and when I noticed the flaw in the time, I couldn't find a place of exile appropriate to my wound so I decided not to die again.

The city is older than the memories, the curse is fenced in by melancholy, time is late for its appointments, walls enclose time with monotony, death looks like my face, the poet leans on a woman in his poem, the general marries my wife, the city vomits its history and I swallow the streets and the crowd swallows me, I, who distribute my blood to strangers, and share a bottle of wine with my solitude, beg you, send my body by express mail, distribute my fingers equally between my friends.

This city is bigger than a poet's heart and smaller than his poem, but it is big enough for the dead to commit suicide without troubling anyone, for traffic lights to bloom in the suburbs, for a policeman to become part of the solution and the streets a mere background to truth.

That evening, when my heart stumbled, a woman from Damascus took hold of me and taught me the alphabet of her desire, I was lost between God whom the shaykh planted in my heart and God whom I touched in her bed, that evening,  
my mother was the only one who knew I would never return,  
my mother was the only one who knew,  
my mother was the only,  
my mother.



I sold my white days on the black market, and bought a house overlooking the war, and the view was so wonderful that I could not resist its temptation, so my poem deviated from the shaykh's teachings, and my friends accused me of cutting myself off, I put kohl on my eyes and became more Arab, and drank camel's milk in a dream and woke up as a poet, I was watching the war like lepers watch people's eyes, and had arrived at frightening truths about poetry and the white man, about the season of migration to Europe, and about cities that receive tourists in peacetime and mujahidin in wartime, about women who suffer too much in peacetime, and become fuel for the war in wartime.

In a reconstructed city like Berlin lies a secret that everyone knows, which is that the...

No, I will not repeat what is known, but I will tell you something you don't know: the problem with war is not those who die, but those who remain alive after the war.

It was the most beautiful war I've been in in my life, full of metaphors and poetic images, I remember how I used to sweat adrenalin and piss black smoke, how I used to eat my flesh and drink screams, death with his scrawny body leaned on the destruction committed by his poem, and wiped his knife clean of my salt, and the city rubbed my shoes with her evening and the street smiled and the city counted the fingers of my sorrow and dropped them on the road leading to her, death weeps and the city remembers the features of her killer and sends me a stabbing by post, threatening me with happiness, and hangs my heart out on her washing line strung between two memories, and oblivion pulls me towards myself, deeply towards myself, deeply, so my language falls on morning, and balconies fall on songs, headscarves on kisses, back streets on women's bodies, the details of alleyways on history, the city falls on the cemeteries, dreams fall on the prisons, the poor on joy, and I fall on memory.



When I became a member of the Union of the Dead, my dreams improved and I began to practice yawning freely, and despite the drums of war singing close to my bloated body I had plenty of time to befriend a stray dog, who chose not to eat from my corpse despite his hunger, and was content to sleep by my feet.

A number of people tried to pull me out of the way, but the sniper argued with his gun so they changed their minds, he was an honorable sniper, worked honestly, and didn't waste time or people.

That little hole,  
Remaining after the bullet had passed through,  
Emptied me of my contents,  
Everything flowed out gently,  
Memories,  
Names of friends,  
Vitamin C,  
Wedding songs,  
The Arabic dictionary,  
The temperature of 37 degrees,  
Uric acid,  
The poems of Abu Nuwas,  
And my blood.

The moment the soul begins to escape through the little gate the bullet has opened, things become clearer, the theory of relativity turns into something self-evident, mathematical equations that used to be vague become a simple matter, the names of classmates we've forgotten come back to us, life is suddenly illuminated in perfect detail, the childhood bedroom, mother's milk, the first trembling orgasm, the streets of the camp, the portrait of Yasser Arafat, the smell of coffee with cardamom inside the house, the sound of the morning call to prayer, Maradona in Mexico in 1986, and you.



Just as if you are eating your beloved's fingers, or suckling from an electric cable, or being inoculated against shrapnel, just as if you are a memory thief, come, let's give up poetry, exchange the songs of summer for gauze dressings and harvest poems for surgical thread, leave your kitchen and the children's bedroom and follow me so that we can drink tea behind the sandbags, the massacre has room for everyone, put your dreams in the shed and give the plants on the balcony plenty of water, for the discussion with iron may go on for a while, leave behind Rumi, Averroes and Hegel, and bring along Machiavelli and Huntington and Fukuyama, for we need them now, leave behind your laughter, your blue shirt and warm bed, and bring your teeth and nails and hunting knife, and come.

Throw away the Arab Renaissance and bring on the inquisition,  
Throw away European civilization and bring on the Kristallnacht,  
Throw away socialism and bring on Joseph Stalin,  
Throw away Rimbaud's poems and bring on the slave trade,  
Throw away Michel Foucault and bring on the AIDS virus,  
Throw away Heidegger's philosophy and bring on the purity of the Aryan race,  
Throw away Hemingway's sun that also rises and bring on the bullet in the head,  
Throw away Van Gogh's starry sky and bring on the severed ear,  
Throw away Picasso's Guernica and bring on the real Guernica with its smell of  
fresh blood,  
We need these things now, we need them to begin the celebration.



## **BERT STABLER**

### *Antediluvia*

I was laid off from my art teaching job at a neighborhood high school on Chicago's south side in July 2011, and the books I brought back from my art classroom I stored in my basement. My basement later flooded, and I let the books dry out for several weeks. This beautiful book of Black Panther photography by Stephen Shame, along with dozens of other lovely books, was ruined. This series was created by scanning what happened after I tore it open, and the pages had fused into this symmetrical meditation on division and stratification. I was rehired two weeks later, and we went on strike just over a year after that.













...in communities. The Germans...  
...the genocide of the Jewish people...  
...over fifty million black people; therefore, we feel...  
...demand that we make...

...housing...  
...black community, then the housing and the land should be made into...  
...cooperatives so that our community with government aid can build and...  
...make decent housing for its people.

**5. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.**

We believe that an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of their true history and their role in the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

**6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service.**  
...to fight in the military service to defend a racist government that does not protect us. We...  
...right and kill other people of color in the world who like black...  
...being recognized for the force and violence of the...  
...military by whom, means necessary.



...the will of black people...  
...When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which connect them with another, it is the duty of that people to declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. We declare that governments long established among men, should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly we experience with alacrity, that we are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right ourselves by abolishing the forms to which we are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce us under absolute despotism, it is our right, it is our duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. We declare that governments long established among men, should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly we experience with alacrity, that we are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right ourselves by abolishing the forms to which we are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce us under absolute despotism, it is our right, it is our duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.



[illegible]

from the works of a broad range of revolutionary theorists, including Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*, and the writings of Mao Tse-tung. Newton and Seale adopted the symbol of a black panther for their fledgling organization, borrowed from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, a branch of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee established to secure the voting rights in Alabama.

The Black Panther Party rapidly morphed from an Oakland-based group with fewer than fifty individuals to a national force with chapters in more than a hundred cities. In 1968, the party opened its first chapter in New York City, where it was joined by a group of five black students from the University of California, Berkeley, who had been active in the Black Student Union at the University of California, Berkeley. The group was joined by a group of five black students from the University of California, Berkeley, who had been active in the Black Student Union at the University of California, Berkeley.

THE PROVERB WISEMAN  
IS WISER THAN  
THE HORSES OF INSTRUCTION

William Blake



















## JULIAN FRANCIS PARK

### Black against the racial suture:

### Miscegenation and the law of genre in *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio*

“Words work as release—well oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture.”

— *Citizen*

*“we live beneath ourselves as julianic monsters fighting monsters with smiling.  
social life is science fiction and it keeps on being new like seeing sails.  
you throw shade on doorways but we love doorways.”*

— *The Feel Trio*

*“The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.  
Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re kin.”*

— *Citizen*

*“let it go till it comes back again.”*

— *The Feel Trio*

1.

*Citizen: An American Lyric* and *The Feel Trio* make trouble for the universal because they reveal the split inside it between the prepositions for and to, between belonging and address, intention and gesture. When Aimé Césaire quit the French communist party he told them he was sick of their brand of marxism subordinating the needs of colonized peoples to those of metropolitan whites. He wanted a universal enriched by every particular. But this is what white empire forbids because it is afraid of losing itself to interracial intimacy and in particular interracial intimacy that doesn’t



produce children. It is willing to tolerate interracial intimacy as long as that intimacy produces children and the children are definitively the children of white empire, able to become the children of white empire, or definitely not the children of white empire. Interracial intimacy that does not produce children as long as it produces something (like marriage) is also considered okay. I learned this from Jared Sexton and so many others that he and I learned it from: because whiteness sees only itself as universal and it has consistently had sufficient capital and/or capacity for violence and sexual regulation (which is itself also often violent, accompanied by violence, etc.) it can never admit that it necessarily depends on antiblackness, the force of law that is called into being by the glorious and absolutely derelict luxuriance that is blackness. The representatives of whiteness need black and blackened people to live the social death of social life, but they instead live the social life of social death that is also blackness.

And so Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* makes trouble for the universal because many of us white and whitened people read it and love it, and either we read the word "you" and are certain that this is a literary technique being used by Rankine to make us feel something or in fact us white and whitened people do feel something because our imaginations get carried away with and from themselves like good imaginations do, until the consequences of being not in self-possession of our body are played out by means of what Rankine—via Judith Butler—reminds us of as our addressability. The trouble is that this book, which many of us white and whitened people like because it seems sometimes to be addressed to us, which is to say, after Rankine-Butler, addressed to making people (hyper)visible to each other, addressed to literarily providing us with the lived experience of blackness in a slim-but-not-too-slim and attractive volume printed on photoquality paper, this book is *not* for us. Read the dedication page: it is "for" Donovan Harris, Charles Kelly, Frankie Porter, and Richard Roderick, also known as "The Cooler Bandits" who had been imprisoned for decades for a series of restaurant robberies in which they kept the restaurant employees in the kitchen cooler out of harm's way. "The Cooler Bandits," four black men



imprisoned for much of their lives for property crimes, are the subjects of a documentary by John Lucas (Rankine's partner to whom is attributed the "book design and composition" of *Citizen*), a documentary being predominantly screened in prisons.

Fred Moten's *The Feel Trio* makes trouble for the universal because though it is dedicated to the white and whitened art and jazz critic and poet William Corbett, us white and whitened people think we know it depicts the play of a blackness that we see and hear and feel but cannot understand, as if it were the textual equivalent of a free jazz to which the title blatantly refers, with all these references to names and places and things we don't know or almost know, or can know if only we direct our search queries toward them, though we are assured, like Corbett is by Moten in the poem "william corbett" in Moten's *B Jenkins* that he, Moten, or someone or something is "looking at the edges of ensemble" (which are, of course, those social relations that improvise the music as well as society itself) "to say that I been calling try / and sing with you on all occasions" (*B* 70). *The Feel Trio* troubles the universal because us white and whitened people believe that it (the book), they (the trio) or he (Moten) is or wants to be here singing (with us or someone somewhat like us? we didn't even know we were singing!) but we thought it, they, he was there, looking where us white and whitened people might think we can't be (at the edges) but are (in ensemble).

## 2.

One way to pose the relation between *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio* is by considering how they both violate what Jacques Derrida called, in an essay by the same name, "the law of genre"—a law that simply orders that "genres are not to be mixed" (Derrida 3). The law of genre is, among other things, the axiomatic basis of knowledge of miscegenation and practice of antimiscegenation, in other words, of the social production of race in and through sexuality, which is also to say the racial production and reproduction of society. Moten has called something like this axiom "the raciality of the



concept.” Of this Sexton writes with regard to the relationship between white supremacy and antiblackness, a relation which feeds off what it necessarily produces as its condition,

Miscegenation is thus taken to indicate a process of mixing, meddling, or mingling between the general and the particular, between the ephemeral body of white universality and the strangely dense corporeality of its dark-skinned others, imagined as sprawling and overpresent, anonymous in their racialized particularity. Antimiscegenation, as a result, is not so much a defense as it is activation, an agency or an aggression that is only inversely index in the savage violence attributed to the ontology of racial blackness. (25)

The racializing incarnation of the law of genre, according to Sexton, is precisely the point at which whiteness is determined as the voice of universal mind and blackness as unheard or underheard (as voice) appearance of particular embodiment. The excess violence imaginatively assigned to blackness is obsessively hoarded and drawn out of a whiteness that inflicts it upon blackness, while black imagination is concurrently intruded upon and remade in part in the image of the white, contra the realities of black embodiment. This is Frantz Fanon more or less: black skin, white masks. Saidiya Hartman writes that racial codification and/as antimiscegenation marks the emergence of the sphere of the social proper to the United States, insofar as the violent regulation of miscegenation constitutes public society as the site at which blacks and blackness are banished and thus cannot appear, except as hypervisible and in need of policing, to put it lightly (170). For Frank B. Wilderson III the effect is a racial suturing, which is to say that across the social break between slavery and the enforced failure of black reconstruction, and for that matter across the break between Jim Crow and post-Civil Rights, a continuity in the racial law of genre is formed between the reiterated position of the Human, which is recognized as living in the realm of social life and thus accorded a recognition of suffering (including



in terms of class exploitation and sexual alienation), and the position of the Slave, which lives in social death and does not generally (except in moments of social crisis, as in the past and perhaps again today) have its mode of suffering recognized. Hortense J. Spillers details the “external imposed meanings and uses” which characterize the suffering by those posited as Slaves or “captive bodies” whether in the life or afterlife of slavery:

(1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, a *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; (4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (Spillers 206)

Wilderson refers to this grammar of suffering in terms of accumulation and the fungible. Harryette Mullen articulates for us the manner in which this grammar is mediated through the current era: it is sometimes no longer the body itself which is to be accumulated (except in the disposessions of imprisonment, literal or figural), rather the black body’s fungibility is to be used as a mode of excreting the affective essence desired of blackness: “The black begins to be seen less as the dark body contrasted with the enlightened mind and more as the repressed and emotional soul of a white social-cultural-political-economic body” (Mullen 338). This latter mode of accumulation and fungibility goes some length to suggest part of why *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio* have been so eagerly received by a liberal white readership in the literary/academic branches of the ideological state apparatus: they are figurations through which blackness can remain the particular that we need (to feel, apart from ourselves) to continue imagining ourselves as commanding a universalist society. For romantically sympathetic whiteness, desiring to feel itself feeling sympathy, “the idea of



historical suffering, death, and loss” (Iam Baucom) are what is desired and what is to be accumulated in aesthetic objects, melancholic productions of which we are obstructed from identifying with precisely because of the racializing law of genre and the ban on miscegenation (Baucom 294-296).

3.

Moten’s essay “Blackness and Nothingness” is something of a response to the back and forth commentary over the relationship between blackness and the category of social death, one of the central concepts of the theories of what, thanks to Wilderson, we have come to know as afropessimism. In that essay Moten lays his chips down: though “analytical precision does not allow for such a flight of fancy”—the notion that blackness qua blackness could be loved—he “remain[s] under the impression, and devoted to the impression, that analytic precision is, in fact, a function of such fancy” (“Blackness” 738). We should take this sense of devotion quite literally since nearly everything Moten has imprinted seems in part to hinge on this: consider the concepts of freedom drive and sexual ‘cut’ in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (where the former is theorized as the groundless ground to Freud’s dialectic of the sex and death drives, and the latter borrowed from Nathaniel Mackey as something like the exorbitant fullness of the void that appears at the site of a split, e.g. a racially sexual/sexually racial division). Consider also the sense that blackness itself has taken for him, at least since *In the Break*, shown here in an essay co-written with Stefano Harney, “Blackness and Governance” from the book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*:

There is an anoriginary drive whose fateful internal difference (as opposed to fatal flaw) is that it brings regulation into existence, into a history irregularly punctuated by transformations that drive imposes upon regulation....The anoriginary drive and the insistences it calls into being and moves through, that criminality that brings the law online, the runaway anarchic ground of



unpayable debt and untold wealth, the fugal, internal world theater that shows up for a minute serially – poor but extravagant as opposed to frugal – is blackness which must be understood in its ontological difference from black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it. (Harney and Moten 47).

It is for this reason that blackness is the criminal basis of the law of genre, its out-law, its law outside the law, that Moten insists that it consists not of *social* death but *political* death—for blackness which is (black) life “is irreducibly social,” which of course is precisely what is feared and excessively policed in miscegenation though “it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject” (or citizen) “by those who, insofar as they are not subjects, are also not, in the interminable (as opposed to the last) analysis, ‘death-bound’” (Moten, “Blackness” 739). It is this irreducible and criminal sociability that won’t die that founds the political sphere of the social itself, what Wilderson has referred to in Antonio Gramsci’s terms as civil society, in which blackness is marked as a bad, banished, or buried subjectivity. Moten’s point is that, to borrow a Mexican proverb, “they thought they’d buried us but they didn’t know we were seeds.” To return briefly to Derrida: this criminality could also be called “the law of the law of genre. It is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy,” an economy that opens up, at the site of the limit the law of genre imposes, “by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole” and “remains as singular as it is limitless” (7). Bhanu Kapil called something like this a “womb” (“anything that gives itself up”) in *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (104).

4.

This is all to say, again, one way to pose the relation between *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio* is by considering how they both violate the law of genre; in other words, on the one hand, between the thumbs and fingers of critics (such as those presently typing this sentence) and other such elements of the



ideological state apparatuses these books pose a fine line (sexual ‘cut?’) for reiterating the ongoing racial suture of the afterlife of slavery. This afterlife has maintained white supremacy and antiblackness even in the guise of the multiracial and multiculturalist “pedagogies of minority difference” (to borrow a phrase from the title of Roderick A. Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things: the University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*) which right now really need to reiterate their appearance of caring if they aren’t going to be made irrelevant by the revolutionary happenings happening both behind and beyond those fabled towers of ivory. On the other hand, these books—behind or beyond the back of the state apparatuses that instantiate the law of genre as antimiscegenation—stage the criminal opportunism or escape that is the reverse side of the use of words to grasp or understand. As in the epigraph from Rankine, these books stage words as release, as “well oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture.” But how do they do this? Yes, yes, they violate the law of genre by unfolding the space opened by the law of genre, which is to say criminality or blackness or queerness or wombness (criminal-black-queer-wombness?), or so many other things: but how? By working the play that poetic form has come to allow such that both *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio* feed the form through a dialectic with other aesthetic genres’ dialectics, namely film and music, respectively (though by no means exclusively), to elaborate some significant part of the ensemble of relations that structure the crises we all are and have been living through, some of us more so and longer than others. *Citizen* and *The Feel Trio* play the work of making reality real back at us through their respective intermedia. Sure, their words work as (catch and) release like “well-oiled doors,” lubricated by all the media greasing them.

5.

I have already noted *Citizen*’s connection to the film *The Cooler Bandits*; many will have also observed the references to Hennessy Youngman’s *ART THOUGHTZ* videos, (presumably) Rankine’s years of watching Serena Williams play tennis on television, the scripts included from Rankine’s



“Situation” video collaborations with John Lucas—as well as the difference between the last two images of the book, JMW Turner’s 1840 *The Slave Ship* (which many believe to refer to the ship Zong) and the *Detail of Fish Attacking Slave* in their relation as establishing shot and close up on that which they represent. The book overflows with motion, pictures, motion pictures, and the problems of visibility, invisibility and hypervisibility. But what’s more, the poems, the stanzas and paragraphs in the poems, the turning between the pages of the poems, and the section breaks operate on a logic of the gradual elaboration of images and scenes through the cuts coordinating them. In Lauren Berlant’s introduction to an interview of Rankine for the magazine *BOMB*, Berlant writes of a “director’s cut” of Rankine’s book in which “many pages ended with the forward slash (/) we associate with the end of the line in a cited poem” from which Berlant concludes that “this / designated the previous writing as a line of poetry embedded in a history captured through citation.” This is true enough; we can imagine the slash functioning as a reminder “not [to] forget to read for the breathless cut and join of enjambment,” but we might just as easily extend upon Berlant’s own filmic metaphor to identify this particular use of enjambment, its “breathless cut and join,” as nothing short of montage.

6.

In the first of seven sections in *Citizen* we are pushed gently back into the recollections of memory: “when you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows.” The past is a matter that surrounds us, it is the spirit of materiality itself, but as memory and imagination it finds itself “reconstructed as metaphor” by an “often associative” “route.” This past carried by this body is remembered here beginning with scents and a scene in which a girl with a forgotten name who rarely speaks to “you” except when the girl asks to copy from exams and attempts to compliment “your” body by saying “your” scent is good and “your” pseudo-white appearance. “You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost



white person.” This is the first of many “microaggressions” documented in the book, amplified and authorized by the teacher’s failure to notice (5-6).

7.

The concluding page of this primal scene, in which a young black girl is made simultaneously hypervisible and invisible because both black but also—for the time being—less black, displays a photograph taken in 2008 by Michael David Murphy called *Jim Crow Rd.* The photo shows a road signpost standing out of parched grass informing the viewer that the road perpendicular to the one depicted is called Jim Crow Rd., a road that seems to traverse a suburban neighborhood where all of the houses are white. The effect, unless you are already lying on the ground, is vertiginous. “You,” having already fallen back to the associative realm of an early memory in which “you” are racialized but also partially whitened, are returned to a photo from the present marked clearly by the slavery’s afterlife. The following page reads, “certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs” and produce “a loss for words,” those things we address to one another that secure our intimacy, until “a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted would call you by the name of her black housekeeper.” The loss of words, among other things, configures itself around a bodily response – pain, shock – to “certain moments” that call into question the presumed intimacy of a friendship, a feeling of betrayal that like miscegenation itself refuses the distinction between its generality and particularity: “do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?” (7). “An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center”: though disgust gets in the way of bodily motion, the body aches to get out of its situation as bodily memory recalls a felt need, agreed upon with another friend, to conceive of the only mode of living as “a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes” (8). This is the life lived as “yes, and”: the social life of social death: “you pull yourself to standing.” This use of the word “you,” which many have commented upon – including



Rankine who in an interview in the magazine *Guernica* described finding it “funny to think about blackness as the second person”—seems to me to play on a popular trope of psychoanalytic film theory, according to which the viewer is brought to identify with the action on screen. The effect of the montage upon this identification is to “suture” the viewing subject together across whatever disruptions may appear in the image. But just as often it is subjecthood that leaves and is asked to leave in these pages, in and between their montage, as the unsettledness of pages contaminate and bring out readers’ bodies, opening upon an enormity of space and distance that is also the disrupted intimacy of two friends or the nearness of a teacher’s classroom inattention and Jim Crow Rd.

8.

“Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen” (9).

“It is not only that confrontation is headache-producing: it is also that you have a destination that doesn’t include acting like this moment isn’t inhabitable, hasn’t happened before, and the before isn’t part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going” (10).

9.

Rankine retells the argument of a friend of “yours”: there are two kinds of selves, our historical ones and our selfish ones. Friends for the most part appear to interact as friends, which is to say as themselves (as their self’s self, that part of themselves they appear to be in control of), that is until your historical selves “arrive with the full force of your American positioning” around a breakage in your relation attributable to a “transgression of your historical self” that jeopardizes the intimacy (14). As, for example, when



“you” ask a friend to look after your child and the neighbor calls you to tell you that “a menacing black guy [is] casing both your homes,” definitely not your friend who is a “nice young man,” and then you call your friend who answers you from outside your home where he has been on the phone and you hear sirens. When you get home and you tell your friend that next time, if they don’t want to get the police called on them for being black in public, they should make their phone calls in the backyard. “He,” your friend, “looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants” (15).

This is the deadlock through which we, whoever we are, cannot simply pass. Yet we have no choice but to. The only question is whether we sew our imagination back together as if it never happened, return to ourselves, historical and bodily memory be damned, or whether we inhabit the feeling of brokenness that already breaks and has been broken in all the preceding moments more or less like this one which have coordinated with no shortage of social support a reiteration of the situation. In the opening poem of the opening section “block chapel” of *The Feel Trio* Moten writes “it’s like / that outside drama is our knowledge of the world / and nobody claims it but us” (3). We, again, whoever we are—all of us—must be and already are in part the us that is of and joins the us that claims that outside drama. That drama is in and on the phones between us, between you and the cops in and on the lawn, between me and my neighbors who can’t tell the difference between someone casing their house and someone they know.

10.

When I first read *Citizen* I did not much care for its second section, the one in which Rankine writes of Serena Williams. Perhaps this was in part a white-normative aesthetic reaction of the “what is this essay doing in a book of poetry” type. Perhaps this was a resistance to what I perceived as an attempt to validate the scenes of ordinary violence through speculations upon spectacle. Perhaps I find tennis boring. At the time, I did not make



the connection between this section and Rankine's "Open Letter" to Tony Hoagland and the racist depiction of Williams in his poem "The Change." Now, it seems that I had missed much. The piece opens, with reference to Hennessey Youngman's videos, with a distinction between two sorts of anger—one that Youngman articulates as a "sellable anger" and another, an "actual anger." The former attracts positive value through the spectatorship of a white audience which desires to perversely consume this hyperbolic, hypervisible appearance, while the later "can prevent, rather than sponsor, the production of anything except loneliness." "You," the viewer of Youngman and Williams, whom identifies more or less with them, at times hold the latter anger, the real thing, as "really a type of knowledge" that simultaneously "clarifies and disappoints." On the one hand, it imposes definition on a situation that otherwise might be wrapped in the question marks that everyday racist violence wraps itself in to pass as something else in an alleged post-black world. Therein lies the disappointment: this reassertion of a politics of visibility, which has already caught the body in its color-distinction, "no amount" of which "will alter the ways in which one is perceived" (24). Rankine puts it as a question: "what does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like?" to which the answer is but one word: black. Or as Rankine quotes Zora Neale Hurston, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Whether the anger expressed is sellable or actual, it makes the expresser no less black for the white spectator—the only difference is whether whiteness is excited or disgusted by this blackness.

But not quite: this is the only difference for whiteness, which orchestrates the cinematographic and televisual cut and join of the political that *Citizen* plays on, in, and against. But there is also a difference for the body, since "the body has memory" and "hauls more than weight"—and the distinction between bodies here disappears: is it "yours" or hers, Serena's—the identification, not with white commentators' narration, but between the mutual feel of two bodies ruled and overruled (28). "It is difficult not to applaud her for existing in the moment, for fighting crazily against the



so-called wrongness of her body's positioning at the service line" (29). The point that I had missed in my first reading is that there's no real difference between the spectacle on TV and the spectacle of wrongness that whiteness lights blackness up with: "this is how racism feels no matter the context." Rankine refers to it as a "collapsed relationship" (30). Something like the forbidden mixing of genres, or the cut that pairs and opens up between two images, two flashes of color. David Marriott, following Fanon, calls this mechanism "intrusion" (I might call the associated anticipatory and resulting affects "protrusions"):

Like a garrison keeping watch over a conquered city, the mechanism of intrusion suggests that there is no gap between the spectacle or stadia of a military occupation, and those quasi-internal wars of the black psyche: 'the true Other of the White Man is and remains the Black Man'. Already possessed by colonialism's total war, the imago of the black is just another battle front in the manichean conflict between coloniser and colonised. (81)

But even if this intrusion of the racial imaginary of whiteness into the black imaginary often turns, for example, to angry outburst, the body and the memory this anger marks remains. The anger clarifies at the same time that it disappoints; it has what Kara Keeling might call a "black femme function" insofar as it might "mark a potential for creativity and self-valorization within affectivity" even if at the same time that it is also "useful to the reproduction of cinematic reality" of the white determining background (Keeling 144). If whiteness intrudes, then the black femme function, blackness itself protrudes. Rankine:

Again Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment,



every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background. (32)

The exercise in “your” understanding is not to evaluate the fairness in this situation which was never anywhere near fair, but to feel the failures of the bodies whom “you” identify with against all sense of propriety or proper self-interest.

11.

The fifth section of *Citizen* follows something of a more familiar script as far as poems go. Though it may still be reliant, as much of the book is, upon the sentence rather than the line as the measure, its somewhat shorter paragraphs and generally fuller pages have an effect—compared to the longer takes which give the previous sections (excepting the more essay-like, just discussed) their slower more classical cinematics—of bringing the reader into a more rapidly shifting perspective. The first page opens as something of an introduction to this section, with this sentence “words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture,” which precisely addresses the quality of words as mediation between the ideal and material. The gestures stitched together in the following sentence seem to be those of a body somewhere between discomfort and frustration, “a pulse in the neck, the shiftiness of the hands, an unconscious blink” until the gestural takes on some of the dialogic of language with “the conversations you have with your eyes” marking the gap of excess and lack within the materially embodied such that the eyes’ conversations “translate everything and nothing. What will be needed, what goes unfelt, unsaid” such that the release the words offer is, again, no simple relinquishing to openness, but also to a closure, as if they release the body to its own recognizance but with a kind of parole or house arrest: “words encoding the bodies they cover.” Again, “despite” the damage and indebtedness that social address obligates “the body remains.” Where and how the body moves itself to words, to



addressing one's apposite across a violent intimacy, how its intension is felt most intrusively intense: "to know what you'll sound like," as if this knowledge before the fact were something like what Harney and Moten have called a "prophetic organization," is the intention of this section (69). "You" enter the scene through a "darkened moment" enlightened by the "blue light" (of the police), still there with your wants and lacks, to receive a police order. "Stand where you are." This order appears on its own, as if it had broken away or suddenly bubbled up from the previous moment, even as it was brought to light, and "you begin to move around in search of the steps it will take before you are thrown back into your own body," "illusory" as the "destination" sought is. The order to remain still has already encoded you such that "what doesn't belong with you won't be seen." In, of, and/or from this body, "yours," which cannot leave either itself or the site it is held to stand on, something protrudes unseen by the blue light, perhaps because it doesn't belong:

You could build a world out of need or you could hold everything black and see. You give back the lack.  
You hold everything black. You give yourself back until nothing's left but the dissolving blues of metaphor. (70)

The blackness "you" would be held to by the blue light takes back, insofar as it "gives back the lack" the light attributes to it, the color blue. Blue slips out of the possession of the light of those boys in blue who would rule the night if they could, into the sound of a cry that is indistinguishable from a song (Mackey's "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" being the reference just as much as M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*) and for that matter a genre "reconstructed as metaphor"—only to be dissolved as you take black back, too, insofar as "you" hold it. Here is where "I," the subject interpellated by the social order and address of the police, dissolves with the metaphor:

Sometimes 'I' is supposed to hold what is not there until it is.  
Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it.



This makes the first person a symbol for something.  
The pronoun barely holding the person together. (71)

The subject as placeholder for political existence is here being and expecting to be abandoned. Not the subject per se, but the subject of propriety, of possessive individualism – the political subject, or citizen. To the world built from need that necessitates such an order that splits you from what you are said not to belong with (mixing, after all, forbidden, *what is* to be split from *what is not*, though the gesture, as already seen, maintains no such separation) is held together by a one letter, symbolic pronoun that barely holds, and certainly does not hold up under pressure. To this “I,” “you” have a sentence on this sentence, and one order to dissolve the police order:

The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.  
Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then  
we’re kin (72).

The blunt force of historical trauma and its protrusions hold back only insofar as they are said to mark an internal lack sometimes called blackness. I, apart from you and unwilling to be addressed in return, am the drag to be dragged out from social death. I politically promulgate social death as a way to ward against the possibility that you don’t need anything (from me), let alone bright, shiny, clean nuclear families, property or the properly familiar, to make us the family we already are if we can feel each other as such, if I can still feel myself as you, if you’ll forgive me, if I can forgive or better yet forget my self of itself.

12.

What is it to feel addressed by (political/social) death and the social ensemble that makes it possible and the ensemble that makes it possible not for us to forget, but to remember in such a way that we never forget



what has been done in “my” name and the name of “my” protection? Or, as Rankine writes “In Memory of Mark Duggan” (who was murdered by police in London and whose death brought out riots against police terror): “How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?”

13.

If “montage” and “scene” appeared before as intermedial watchwords for a mechanics of *Citizen’s* invaginated blackness, its event of miscegenation and thereby concurrent site of threat to and attraction for whiteness’s law of genre, then for *The Feel Trio* the watchwords could be “ensemble,” “performance” and “song.” As Moten’s acknowledgements indicate, “The Feel Trio” refers not only to the three sections that make up the book, “block chapel,” “come on, get it!” and “I ran from it and was *still* in it,” but also, “when all is said and done,” to the jazz ensemble “Cecil Taylor, piano, William Parker, bass, and Tony Oxley, drums.” There is a sort of fractal relationship between “song,” “performance” (or “improvisation”) and “ensemble.” While Moten writes of the song as a “de/centered structure” (Moten, *Break* 54), performance is the real social time out of political time, and ensemble the (temporospatial) relationship that takes place without ever taking place. *The Feel Trio* is all three: song, performance, ensemble. One of Moten’s wonderful renovations is the dialectical materialist sense of the latter term of the series—ensemble—as in Karl Marx’s sixth “Thesis on Feuerbach”: “human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” where “ensemble” appears as another formulation of the term “totality.” In Moten’s work this is brought home and taken away by the aesthetics of the black radical tradition of performance and song.



14.

The question of the unit of unity, the site upon which politics holds the social arrangement it claims together—insofar as it holds the fort-of-the-self down from what Harney and Moten have called the surround—is also in *The Feel Trio* the question of the subject: “I ran from it and was *still* in it.” “Still”’s italicization accents its duality as both/either stuck in space and/or enduring in time, as in, respectively, “hold still” or “are we still waiting.” This section of the book, the title of which I have just referred to, opens with a poem including the following lines on space, beginning “I come from around to just above angola escape. song / is homeless for running away inside,” and the space in which time resides, closing “then reels but for real we don’t play but curl up in boxes.” Here the subject literally emerges, it comes from around, and ends up right near a prison break. Re-formed as song, the lack of the (black) subject as (abjected) subjected-object, as politically banned from society but irreducibly social, this subject’s placelessness is an escape in and from inside, from which and where the time of history gathers as reels that don’t play back but curl up in the containment of record. The song as subject, the subject as object is also the materiality of its production, reproduction and loss. But before the poem gets anywhere it’s not going, it goes nowhere together: “make us clear the / stumps and squats and raise shit up on a brutal echoed / bottom. we don’t feel comfortable till we step and till / in them public private clubs.” Under the overtones of a social violence there remains together a social pleasure. In the closing section of *The Feel Trio* every poem begins with “I”; it’s literally I and I (and I), the I is always there but only a part of us. The I is just one manifestation of the impossibility of taking place that takes time in the song: “when you sing what you don’t know how to say the / saying turns. we buried all of ‘em on less than that.” This is the love that maintains Moten’s black optimism, that the thing that is supposed to be nothing more than a thing is always more than itself, not just because it makes possible something more than itself but also because it was never just itself alone, it was “all of ‘em” together, buried but ever turning, dead like the unsung, oversung song when the needle scratches the vinyl at the end of a side turned over as if just by us singing at



it. This love is one love, a love of the impoverished unit and unity: “I can’t love nobody but the poor.” It is also the love of one, the section and the book concludes, “I am fmoten.”

15.

The problem of desire, satisfaction, and loss—familiar themes in theories of the subject and subjection—is brought to bear on the manner of an inner conflict that is also an inner-outer joy, what Rankine calls an “undesired desired encounter” (79). As one of Moten’s poems on this problem begins, “i like to enjoy myself.” And the joy is immediately responded to (by the poem? by the self? by another?) “I enjoyed you, fred,” immediately conditioned “‘cause we tell / stories. ‘cause we live in common” (92). This problem of enjoyment is also the problem of a “new science” (83), the reference to which could be both “the new science” proposed by Césaire in “Poetry and Knowledge” as a kind of poetics and to this “new science”’s propositional reiteration in Sylvia Wynter’s cross-pollination of anti-colonial, continental and marxist theory with contemporary biology and physics in essays like “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.” The physics references are all over this section, and even in this poem, continuing after “common” with “every night, live in / stockholm, the secret acceleration of a thousand years / on the road till the particles collide and cry on the / bridge between cern and fermilab, as sacred means.” If Michel Foucault at times referred to his history of technologies of subjection as a micro-physics of power, Moten (perhaps after Wynter, after Césaire) takes the physics quite literally for a way of thinking the infinite inside of one. Moten takes the risk that the subject carries with it a whole history of social death, insofar as “the theory / of enjoyment puts itself in danger to remain still, as a part / of breath, while the sails glide.” The part(icle) is still, its still here running, but as part of the motion of “sails”—and make no mistake, every ship for Moten is both a mechanism of global logistics, a containership, and a mechanism of subjection as enslavement, a slaveship—but “when you can’t do no / better, the feeling of the theory of enjoyment is solid.” Even if the



presupposition of the subject is part of the legacy of (theories of) whiteness there is still some there still, Moten seems to say, in those feelings that remain despite every attempt to expunge their particulate matter from the scene of the crime and crimes of history, left as evidence of “the experiment of the ones who live to eat enormously.” As Rankine reminds us, the body remains and not just in frustration and disappointment. That the body that remains enjoys itself dangerously and dangerously enjoys itself is also what continuously scandalizes whiteness—what whiteness degrades and/or thinks as the degraded is beautiful not *despite* but *because* it threatens contamination by mere fact of being so damn enormously attractive enjoying itself to death. And this attraction affects all of us, even those whom, afflicted with whiteness, repress and abject it.

16.

Moten’s theory of enjoyment, his poems of the subject, is and are also an aesthetics, or a stylistics of an exemplary singularity. An “uncountable thing outside” that also “is everything” insofar as it is a thing. “I often amount to no more than a stylistics,” he writes, but to what do stylistics amount (87)? Perhaps whatever they or it perform(s). Performance linked to sensation, enjoyment, and feeling frames the middle section, “come on, get it!” Besides the title itself, a call, request or order to perform called out to the one (always) already performing, the last words of the first section “come on and dance and eat and rub” evoke a range of modes of (calls to) performance, and the first words of poem number “1” inscribe “Performers feel each other differently.” This difference felt by those in the performance feels itself “as material things that never happen.” This is the paradox of performance which is also the paradox of blackness which is also the turning on itself of a prophetic organization of a general tendency that is the materialist dialectic better known as communism. Everyone really feels each other and this is what matters, the poem continues, “in persistent substance and their risen cities” as what spirit there is in things, Moten’s term for which is animateriality. Differently felt to each in performance, the we of the risen



cities above and as the cities we razed to the ground are “fallen, / falling down together in an accident we dream” but which is no less real for being imagined as “certain clinical tendencies, / or in the general structure of being a problem” that the performers dream themselves out *loud* as *out* loud (35). Between the first and third sections, “come on, get it!” performs the page quite differently, as a score, felt as different than the blocks in “block chapel” and their displaced placements on the page, or the unity split inside the boxes curled upon themselves full of gaps in “I ran from it and was *still* in it.” They cut “a little section between one, not one and two, the impurity / that found themselves, original derivative and fresh outside” breaking the law of genre which would maintain that these sections, this ensemble, be apart rather than a part of each other, maintaining a unity opening into itself outside of itself as found twice over, both initiated and recovered from loss, like the middle of a performance that continues without ever really happening between parts but in part or in its parts each as originally derived from the whole which it is that never appears except “outside / at home” (36). We hear the score differently but its part of the same feeling.

17.

The poems here—as a performance is and performers are wont to do—elaborate both a serial extension and intension, counting up an in and an in out. By number “9” the score, at this point dancing all across the page, comes to get it to settle in something like stanzas, the poles of page performance held like “look how song and dance don’t go together down the avenue,” which is to say like sight and sound “with some audiovisual shape to us, and aerated, in the event of color” (58). In this sense miscegenation and the law of the law of genre are precisely the structural objects at work here in and on the real spirit alive in matters of music as real spirit material: “we revel in what breaks us up. / with nothing it’s impossible and easier, the same but really close to one another but unbridgeably far” (59). The question is “how to read this is double now” in and against the white aesthetic concept of timespace that founds, e.g. in Immanuel Kant’s transcendental aesthetic,



aesthetics on a rigid distinction of space and time, of differences between us (in space) from the differences with us (in time) that we have gathered together (as performance). In other words, we have to read this (the poem as song, performance, and ensemble) doubly—not just in space or in time, but with the double consciousness of more or less than one timespace that overfills the racialized and racializing split within and between genres. So, “how do we read this” event, this split? We read it in overheard color, color we don’t own or have on our own, with some audiovisual shape that we gave to us. We read that generality structures this problem that is the problem of the general, of us as generally a problem for the structure. And we revel in it. We revel in the feeling of being a problem. This problem is also the problem of feeling and thinking us as a we and thereby troubling the universal, insofar as we are enriched by every particular, in the first place. And this we has to be all, all of us in the ensemble, when we are in the ensemble, because it is all of us in the ensemble when we’re there showing up ready to perform.

And we read this as “this is what it’s for” to let the us that is us when we are us “to claim catastrophe / to rubble for catastrophe,” claiming our broke selves as the break that broke ourselves open that will break what we made ourselves and with a simple turn and that lack that “we” gave the world to give to us, “we” give back the lack “to turn the world.” Of course the world is already turning, in “12,” which is folded into the last line of “11,”

we depend on plants not to work to rule, to volunteer to repudiate  
the genevan, unsung to smithereens, with a personal/ haint and  
ivy. this overcome from under keep having come just yesterday,  
just like forever. the plasticity of plants and the sisters/ who tend  
them is something to see, through black white sun, when they  
breathe in circles to work this thing, because it is our pleasure.  
(64)

These sisters’ work works this thing called the world or their place in the world as a problem for the general sense of the word (world), themselves;



the sisters, like the world too, depending upon the plants and the unsung heroics of their particles.

18.

Everybody and everything's on the block in "block chapel," the whole ensemble of the ensemble as the social whole, which is an aspect of the reason why it's so damn difficult to read. Song and performance are one thing or another hard enough to know how to read now, but ensemble poses a whole other ensemble of difficulties. Half or more than half the places and names and place names have to be looked up, and half or more than half of them can't be found except right there before you in their irrefutably literate illiteration—and there are so many places and names and place names on and in the block, where the block both names where things become black, which is to say fungible and accumulated, but also the place where the chapel is or which indeed is in its entirety a chapel where things become black, which is to say irreducibly social, i.e. sung songs such that they transmute the whole substance of things through underheard prayer. Consider this prayer that appears exactly midway through the chapel ensemble's performance: "place is our new destitute imperative. place her trill inside. see if you can find a place." The poems of this section begin as single stanzas or blocks of text, located variously on the page, with a range of line lengths, eventually with some of the lines shifting their indent further in or farther out, and a couple of instances in which the blocks are broken from one into two and one into three, until the aforementioned prayer.

Place here is, in this section, thoroughly on display as placed then displaced twice over. First, place is now both necessary and impoverished, where destitution is also more than impoverishment or lack but also quite simply a displacement, or placing away (*de*, as in away from, *statuere*, as in to place). Second, place is an act of inducing location, to put, a trill (as in true/real as well as a sound bubbling with tonal oscillation) belonging to her inside. Third, place is no longer necessity per se but a place to be found, perhaps



in the dual sense of the word previously considered. Three ensemblic senses of inside-out social materiality. Following this prayer and below it, the first of three small stanzas spread horizontally, the poem refers perhaps to place, “you are the / flex principle / to build a new / impulse / in everyone,” a reference further elaborated by the second, “we propel we / drive the bloc / away it falls / away / we’re carried away,” and with the second situated and reiterated in the third “drive away the bloc experiment / it falls away we’re / driven by what / we carry / drive away. fall out, engine, fallaway” (16). Thus place as and in this ensemble flexibly impels everyone, by making us drive the place that itself falls away as we get carried away driving it, inasmuch as the we is and is of the block that experiments with driving and falling.

Because the block isn’t just a block, not simply as a thing or grouping of things, but also a bloc, an ensemble of things organized by the impulse they create and depart from as destitution, trillness, and finding. An ensemble organized by music, a matter that never happens. Blackness. Communism. This sort of animateriality of place as song as performance as ensemble could also be called “soul power,” where soul power “is an ornament” like “her gold tooth with the elemental slide” or as “an ornament / of a new bird come out in the open flood”(7). At some point Moten’s prayer loses a “p” and becomes empowered by a soul in the ornamental sense that was already there in place: “lace is our new / destitute imperative. / lace her trill / inside. see if you / can find some lace” (19). Can you hear the common, undercommon difference? Can you feel it? Again and again? Inside? Yourself? Moten’s tells us to “let it go till it comes back again” (12).



## Works Cited

- Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Claudia Rankine." *Bomb Magazine*. Fall 2014.
- Césaire, Aimé. "Letter to Maurice Thorez." *Social Text* 28:2. Summer 2010.
- "Poetry and Knowledge." *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry: 1946-82*. trans. Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith. Charlottesville, VI: University Press of Virginia, 1990.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." trans. Avital Ronell. *Signature Derrida*. ed. Jay Williams. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Ferguson, Roderick A. *The Reorder of Things: the University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Autonomedia, 2013.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Kapil, Bhanu. *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. Berkeley, CA: Kelsey St. Press, 2001.
- Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's Flight: the Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol." *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Moten, Fred.B Jenkins. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4. Fall 2013.
- "In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition." Minneapolis, MN: U. of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- "The Feel Trio." Tucson, AZ: Letter Machine Editions, 2014.
- Mullen, Harryette. "Miscegenated Texts and Media Cyborgs: Technologies of Body and Soul." *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field*. eds. Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014.
- Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Wilderson, Frank B. III. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." *The New Centennial Review* 3:3. Fall 2003.



## Jocelyn Saidenberg

*Dead Letter*

Roof Books, 2014

REVIEWED BY TYRONE WILLIAMS

Whether viewed from the left or the right, the philosophical and political heritage of the negative has tended to emphasize its “positive,” Gandhian-cum-guerrilla resourcefulness. However, as her last book (if not title) made explicit, Jocelyn Saidenberg has tended to focus on what is “lost,” what is not possible, under its sign. In other words, she has situated the negative in the foregrounds of social and cultural spaces, letting its philosophical and political ramifications radiate as background “noise.” In *Dead Letter*, her rewriting-as-extension of Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener,” that noise comes to the fore in the figure of Bartleby. In telling the story from the scrivener’s, rather than the lawyer’s, point of view, Saidenberg follows a long tradition within literary history, perhaps the most famous example of which is Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Unlike Rhys’ 1966 prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 novel, *Jane Eyre*, Saidenberg’s narrative is set at the “same” time as Melville’s story. But were one to read these two stories back to back, one could not avoid the sensation that, collectively, they read as a kind of deferred dialogue, dialogue, that is, in the Beckett sense.. Put another way, Saidenberg’s narrative reminds us that though the lawyer occasionally addresses Bartleby, he is actually speaking to the implied readers of the narrative. That is, he speaks to these readers *through* Bartleby. Although the original story might appear to suggest that its readers are privileged eavesdroppers when the lawyer speaks to Bartleby, it is actually Bartleby who is the eavesdropper, precisely at the moments it appears he is being directly addressed. The implied readers (at the time of, and long after, the story’s publication) are the attorney’s primary, intended audience. And the attorney, as we will see, is himself one of those implied readers.



Performing this kind of narrative sleight-of-hand was Melville's forte (see, for example, "Benito Cereno"), and Saidenberg's *Dead Letter* excavates this *sub rosa* strategy. Bartleby will always have been a dead letter." Now suddenly I am to be removed from circulation. This/my home, eternal dusk, invaded only by shadows. I am/cast out. Where, as formless, who, as unrecognizable,/ when, am I capable of such exit, how, bound by this/silent disaster, a figure without form." (15) Long before he'd been hired as a copyist by the lawyer, Bartleby, rumor had it, had lost his job at a Dead Letter Office. This possible backstory propels Melville's narrative to its conclusion; it offers the lawyer a first cause, an original genesis, for Bartleby's perplexing behavior. Making explicit the theological underpinnings of the lawyer's entire humanist ethos (he refers to himself and Bartleby as "sons of Adam" and separately names himself an "old Adam"), Saidenberg front-loads Melville's backstory. However, insofar as Melville's original story begins with the lawyer complaining that he has lost his job because of the elimination of his position, Master of Chancery, we know that he has suffered a fate similar to that of the scrivener, though he doesn't hear the rumor about Bartleby losing his prior job until after the scrivener's death. In brief, the above citation from the opening of *Dead Letter* might just as easily be the bitter ruminations of the lawyer. Or both lawyer and scrivener. Saidenberg collapses the beginning and ending of Melville's story, a gesture which replicates the merging of distinct identities throughout Melville's and Saidenberg's stories. Nonetheless, for the sake of focus, I will read Saidenberg's text as if its opening gambit refers only to Bartleby.

Hired for his "ability to decipher handwriting. To sound/ out the correct intention, to sleuth a destination," Bartleby is a consummate reader. At the Dead Letter Office, he performed salvaging operations, saving lost letters from the fires of oblivion. However, the letters that he and others could not decipher were burned. What kind of reader was Bartleby? And what does it mean to name a letter as indecipherable? "Stiejt Kanedeka means State of Connecticut. I could smell it. Burning. For the rest we fed to the flames." (13-14) The wall of Wall Street (Melville's tale is subtitled "A Story of Wall



Street”) is not only the apotheosis of the ancient barrier between finance and money but also, in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the consolidation of English as the national language of the United States. Forced “to leave as if possible to publish [him]self,” Bartleby, “an anonymous dead letter man,” cannot be “thought, formed, burned, written.” (16) Moreover, as Saidenberg’s use of four of the five pillars of modern journalism—“Where,” “who,” “when,” “how”—in the first citation suggests, the standardization of journalism as an “objective” profession offering its readers the “truth” followed the professionalization of law, English (e.g., the publication of Webster’s dictionary) and other disciplines of the written word (e.g., the English Department). The literary, like the journalistic, proffers an array of truths meant to compensate for a discarded Truth.

Thus, this discarded “professional” reader, this broken link between addressees and addressers, finds employment in a law office as a copyist, a professional who rewrites what others have written. This job also depends on his skill to decipher handwriting, on being a reader. But the law is instituted as a kind of undead office. The “documents” Bartleby copies have no destination outside the law, outside the office, even if they are destined for a client or another firm. The circularity of the law is read by Saidenberg’s Bartleby as analogous to the narcissism of workplace civility in general and the “boss” in particular: “To befriend me means his own delicious self-approval,/ a self-love he couldn’t deny. I grant him that. To humor/me, he might think, costs him nothing, yet might gain/him a sweet morsel for his conscience.” (30) Like a “son of Adam,” Bartleby recognizes the sinister figure of usury behind the façade of top-down etiquette. The lawyer’s investment in Bartleby—so stable compared to the machinations of Turkey and Nippers (“I am only his prob-/lem in that I am no problem at all...”)—returns interest which is exactly, and only, the lawyer’s “interest” in Bartleby. This interest is read by Saidenberg’s Bartleby, however, from elsewhere, not from the sanctioned places of homosocial fraternization but from the forbidden zone of homoeroticism: “Is his love, wrong love, wrong law...? In the law office the tables are turned; now Bartleby is “a last



column of some ru-/ined temple, ...a wreck in his Atlantic..." Their "love's ship/sunk," the attorney "returns" Bartleby as one would some defective purchase. All this derives from Bartleby's reading of the attorney's attempt to find the "correct" address of this dead letter which prefers not to arrive at another destination because it, Bartleby, is, at last, "home." However, the attorney is not the "return" of the Bartleby who sounded out the "correct intention" at the dead letter office (in which case the attorney would be his "Atlantic"). Bartleby reads the lawyer as if he were a New Critic (and the seeds of New Criticism began to flower in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c.), one who prefers ambiguity (Turkey and Nippers as the perfect pairing of statement and counterstatement): "For our attorney yearns that drifting I would between/ an everlasting no and an everlasting yes always be. His/fragment suspends in mid-sentence." (31) It's as though everything the lawyer says is meant to keep Bartleby repeating "I would prefer not to," despite the fact that the lawyer's evident, and increasing, frustration with Bartleby eventually lands the latter in the tombs—just before he arrives, at last, to his tomb.

But if the lawyer misreads Bartleby because he does not, in the end, read him, the same may be true for Bartleby's (mis)reading of the lawyer. In situating the lawyer within an allegedly suppressed homoerotics field, Bartleby, as Saidenberg has it here, may be reading through the lawyer to us, a contemporary (but by no means last) audience of readers. Or if not (only) us, perhaps Bartleby is simply projecting his desire as that of the lawyer. Perhaps he too is caught up in the circularity of desire: "His early arrival caught me mid-dream." The scene here, and in Melville, is what I think of as the scene of instruction in the story. Both Bartleby and the lawyer are standing on either side of the office door. The lawyer is satisfied that Bartleby has vacated the office, but when the lawyer accidentally bumps his knee against the glass pane, Bartleby responds from inside: "Not yet. I am occupied." To which the lawyer says, "Not gone!" he murmured to me." (42) This is Saidenberg's version. Melville's reads "Not gone!" I murmured at last." It seems clear that the lawyer is speaking to himself; Bartleby has overheard something not meant for his ears. The lawyer has been talking to



himself and we, the readers, are, like Bartleby, eavesdropping. At the same time we are outside the office with the attorney since we, like him, never find out what Bartleby is doing in the office on a Sunday morning. We are both sides of the office door that binds the lawyer and Bartleby even as it bars one from the other.

Saidenberg imagines what is absent from Melville's story, including what exactly Bartleby is doing inside the office when he bars the lawyer from entering his own premises ("Not yet. I am occupied."). (41) This moment when the script is flipped, when the employee gets the upper hand on the employer, has been read as an archetype of everything from the Civil Rights Movement's emphasis on passive resistance (a phrase that the lawyer uses to describe Bartleby's actions in Melville's story) to the Occupy movements in the United States, Europe, the Middle East and, most recently, in Hong Kong (the Umbrella Revolution). And certainly one can read Saidenberg's interest in passivity as a variation on negativity in her work in general. However, as I noted at the outset, Saidenberg appears just as interested, if not more interested, in the accumulation of losses, of withdrawals, that underpin the negative. Thus Bartleby, though still caught up in the dialectic of "I" and "you," begins to use "we" and "our" more often as we follow him through the labyrinth that is the "limbo" of every dead letter:

...You like me, not willed, unrushed and involuntary, bewildered, when you're that will that cannot be hence a nothing to be read, nothing to be written, no color to be painted. We fall outside, an insoluble nothing, for we have fallen, are felled in our orchard. Love, could it be that what we prefer is nothing itself? Itself doing nothing? (49)

*Dead Letter* concludes not with Bartleby's death but his imprisonment, his head leaning against his cell wall. He is still "looking for nothing in particular" (81) but is cognizant of his "Errancy" in trying to enter, as



“formlessness,” what already is, for in entering the labor market Bartleby, by dint of occupation, created an edifice of meanings, though he admits, “I didn’t mean to mean, didn’t assume to mean otherwise.” (82) Saidenberg understands that for all those who work, write, copy, or revise—in short, for every human born into an already existing world—there are only cells to inhabit, though their walls may be scraped at, clawed into, upon. Thus, at the structural level, Saidenberg organizes her writing in text blocks that are enjambed according to line length, not syllabic division. It isn’t much of a gesture, perhaps, but in elevating the constraint of a text block over the dogmatism of the syllable, writing as process over writing as destination (e.g., English grammar), Saidenberg honors all those out of Stiejt letters organized in states.



## Frank Sherlock

*Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated*  
ixnay, 2014

REVIEWED BY ERICA KAUFMAN

### “The Poem Starts Here”: The Vital Material(s) of Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated

After reading Frank Sherlock's latest collection, *Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated* (ixnay press 2014), I found myself thinking back to an interview with Glenn Ligon, in which the first question he's asked (by Stephen Andrews) is prefaced with “you have developed over the last ten or so years a vocabulary of materials.”<sup>1</sup> One of the things I admire about Frank Sherlock's work, which is particularly striking in this book, is that he has built his own vocabulary of Philadelphia. But I'm not sure if that's accurate. Perhaps it's a Philadelphic vocabulary that is at once commentary, activism, love letter, street chaos, “working bodies,” and ...

Nothing is  
unconditional  
in this  
existence or  
the other way  
around      I move in  
this manner  
as a public (79)

The first half of the stanza sets up a social critique—“nothing is/ unconditional/ in this/ existence...”—but this commentary is complicated by the way Sherlock uses his line breaks—we begin with “nothing *is*” and are then gently propelled both “in this/ existence” and “the other way/ around.”



When the “I” is introduced in line six, the tone of the stanza shifts; we have a speaker, yet again, Sherlock is making his line breaks work—“around I move in”—the “I” is moving in, but the location of where or what this means feels unsettled. Then, the last two lines—“this manner/ as a public.” Granted, this is the seventh lyric in a twenty-seven-page sequence titled “Very Different Animals”; however, what this moment does is collapse the public/plural with the private/singular. There’s a huge difference between “as a public” and “as in public” or “as the public.”

The public/private tensions we all experience is a sensation that reverberates (and is constantly shifting) throughout this book. In “Don’t Forget Me in the Dimension You Choose to Live,” Sherlock writes, “Here’s to/ The first/ Day of/ The rest/ Of our/ Isolations” (25). The word “isolations” is what sticks out here—yes, we are all isolated to a certain extent given the fast-paced techno-centric blah blah daily blah routines blah many of us participate in, but, but the word isn’t singular—it is plural—“Isolations.” In other words—our isolation is not just any one thing or sensation, “isolation” is plural just as “our” is plural, but it is also indicative of the way that isolation(s) can be experienced and interpreted differently by any one person at any one time.

In *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, Etel Adnan writes, “Any map carefully scanned tells us that there is no uncharted piece of land, nowhere to escape and start an anonymous life.”<sup>22</sup> This sense of the over-occupied and over public land we navigate is one that Sherlock continues to examine throughout the book. In “Each of These Begin with a Recorded Message,” he writes, “This contact microphone is held/ against this heart attempting/ to capture the sound of/ deteriorating structure” (37). A “recorded message” is one that has some remnant of the human in it, but lives inside a machine. We record messages when we don’t have time to speak. Even when absent, we now have the tools to leave our voice(s) behind. Similarly, a “contact microphone” (a microphone that can sense vibrations through solid objects) appears again “this heart” and the image created is one of the/our



private organ amplified, the sounds inside our chests made public. But, as Sherlock's lines progress, we see that the "heart" is actually a "deteriorating structure" and the sounds of its decline are what the microphone makes contact with.

Thinking about and imagining the heart as "deteriorating structure" . . . I've thought of the heart as a muscle, an organ—both things that can deteriorate/ degenerate. But by selecting the word "structure" to use here, Sherlock shifts the implications of the image of our most sensitive organ. When I think of a "structure" I instantly think of buildings—huge buildings, the kinds that I hate watching emerge all over the East Village in NYC. If the heart turns into another "structure" this also implies that the thing that keeps us alive, makes us most human, has turned mechanized and sterile, shifted into a steel container for "isolations."

"Is this thing on" (40)

Lawrence Weschler's title essay from *Uncanny Valley: And Other Adventures in the Narrative*<sup>3</sup> tracks the process through which animators try to make a believable human face. Early in the essay Weschler points out, "as everybody knows, faces (as opposed, say, to arms, or thighs, or abdomens) are the Seat of the Soul, and souls simply aren't quantifiable." In other words, faces are what makes us, as humans, unique, individual. This is territory that should still be "uncharted," private, inimitable. Yet by the end of the piece, we know that even a smile can be digitally rendered in a believable way. This scares me.

In "Shot Appliance," Sherlock writes, "What the/ plant knows/ what the/ computer/ knows/ will have/ textual/ afterlife" (52-3). Again, there's a joining of plant and computer, natural and machine, but this moment feels optimistic to me. There is the possibility of "textual afterlife," these ways of "knowing" will linger specifically (not it is "the plant" not "a plant"), a sensation that is much different from the reproduction of faces that Weschler describes. This



same poem ends, “it turns/out I/can no/longer/serve the/device” (61). The speaker demonstrates agency here, as the short lines turn from one break to the next, so does the speaker’s decided engagement with the “device.”

Thus far I’ve been honoring the way that Sherlock’s book sparks a myriad of reactions and associations in me as I read. It’s an amazing feeling. Like the poem never stops; it keeps reaching out from within the book taking on a job of its own. This is due to the craft of the poems, the precision and commitment to the work of the word that reverberates from page to page. The book is comprised of ten titled and longer poems, with interludes in the form of prosaic pieces that all begin with “You can feel good.” The result of this sequencing is a book that feels like an opera—a series of independent, yet connected pieces woven together with lines like “Let’s feel good & meet under the overpass because now is the/ time to be close” (125).

The title poem begins, “Yes you can hear/ noise music/ coming off/ my body/ healing then/ scratching at/ wounds of peace” (119). These seven short lines demonstrate the way Sherlock’s poems move quickly because of their tight line breaks, creating an innovative conversational critique of what we think we “hear,” and that which is heard is “noise,” are the “wounds of peace.” Those familiar with his reading style can also hear Sherlock reading these poems in the way only he can render them, and, yes, “You can feel/ good about half of everything & the half that seems to be missing/ Just feel for it” (103).

This idea of “just feel[ing]” is one that I think is radical, particularly given the chaos of our contemporary moment where there seems to be war all the time and it is hard to feel good and even harder to trust one’s capacity to “feel for it,” when our environment is always shifting. In *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space*, Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand look at PACE (Poet Activist Community Extension), a group that Sherlock is involved with that involves “guerrilla poetry readings” in the form of poets literally out on and in the streets, reading poems and handing out broadsides to passersby. Boykoff and Sand describe Sherlock’s work in this context



(particularly his short lines): “the reader must encounter each word, as well as the cumulative whole. A poem, in this way, attempts to be the opposite of a soundbite—poetry as language that slows us down” (52).<sup>4</sup> This use of the poem as productive intervention into rote/routine daily public is one that is also present in *Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated*. Our reading is slowed down and de-familiarized by the form of the poems themselves (vacillating between short lyric and open field whole page immersion), and the language of the texts continue this work through moments like: “The money line/ short the life/ line okay the love/ line thick enough/ to be read as two” (67). Love, life, money pile on top of each other layered almost conversationally, creating the kind of tension that comes with surprise that intensifies with lines like “I have been receded” (69).

Even title of this book, *Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated*, engages in a commentary on public/private constraints. The phrase refers to plaques on certain streets and sidewalks in Philadelphia, which share the same inscription. Philadelphia Street Department spokeswoman Cynthia Hite explains the “reasoning” behind these markers: “When a person places one of these markers in the sidewalk, they are accomplishing two purposes. One, they are stating the ground behind the marker is private, not public, and they are also putting people on notice that this is not a street and therefore cannot be opened by affidavit.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Sherlock’s title is entering into dialogue with these public markers that remind us that the ground we walk on is not actually public.

So, where are we left to walk? How can we learn to carry Sherlock’s verse in our pockets?

“Each creature is secured by the sling/ of culture/ as asserted in the press materials” (131).

“The declarations of independence/ have been submitted/ for editing” (135).



Lines like these, from the last poem in the book, “Feast Day Gone & Coming,” are the kind of lines I want to hold close because they remind us that no matter how little of our own selves remain uncharted, no matter how public our private becomes, no matter how many wars we’re trapped within, Frank Sherlock is there with us at the “experience center.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Ligon, Glenn. *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Page 117.

<sup>2</sup> City Lights Publishers, 2005. Page 32.

<sup>3</sup> Counterpoint, 2011. Page 1.

<sup>4</sup> Boykoff, Jules and Kaia Sand. *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space*. Palm Press, 2008. Page 52.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/i\\_wanna\\_know-38342814.html](http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/news-and-opinion/i_wanna_know-38342814.html)



**Chris Nealon**

*The Victorious Ones*

Commune Editions, 2015

REVIEWED BY ERIC SNEATHEN

*Oh and Chris if you read this—*

Perhaps this is too intimate too quickly, but I was compelled to return to your beginnings after reading your latest chapbook, *The Victorious Ones*.

“[He] is a writer of mysterious content,” Thom Gunn wrote of your *Ecstasy Shield* in 2001, “There is something here of a kind of Gothic poetry, yet it is Gothic-sexual-surrealist... Strange appeals are made with strange motivations, by moonlight as it were, but are couched in oddly reasonable terms.”

After waiting for your chapbook to arrive via Interlibrary Loan, I was disappointed that Gunn’s preface was not longer—I have omitted here only his invocation of Auden’s “The Orators”—but how right that he underscores your preoccupations with the conditioned terms of allure, the living with the dead that we demonstrate to one another in poetry, perhaps specially.

The *Victorious Ones*, does it not turn us to the Gothic-sexual-surreal?

Sections 5 and 16 written in a future anterior to your child (“I have dreamed of mine / along some empty road in camouflage and tatters, scrambling for / potable water in 2046”).



Sections 11 and 12 are written to the recently deceased Peter Culley (“I felt you were describing, in case I wanted to try it, how you’d / learned to write those lines like brushed-up nap on a trampled / carpet, fresh again —”).

Section 15 yearns for a realization—“that the roof of time has been torn off”—captured so exquisitely in *The Salt Eaters* (“How I pray for access to that feeling! / Toni Cade Bambara        you are missed”).

In your statement for *The Volta Book of Poets*, you said, “... I’ve become interested in what [my poems] can do if they are nested, so to speak, in different rhetorical registers. I’m interested in poems within poems. And I like the moments when a poem signals that poetry is present nearby, or offstage... I think of it as a rough equivalent to the moments in popular songs when the singer mentions hearing a song, or references singing, or sings about the DJ.”

These comments seem equally applicable to your recent collection *Heteronomy* as to *The Victorious Ones*, both of which incorporate quotation, exempli gratia, appositional phrasing, abstractions rounded into colloquialisms, ellipses...

But if *Heteronomy* nests lyrics to highlight the multifaceted engagement of the revolutionary spur of late 2011, roughly, at battle with nothing less than the spatio-temporal logics of US late capital, I wonder how *The Victorious Ones* might differentiate itself.

It was just last week that Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover, and Juliana Spahr gave a reading at UC Santa Cruz, after which it was recounted that the marches, demonstrations, riots of the previous years have continually called for rearticulation within an ever-shifting (-expanding?) field of engagement: a limit of perception, perhaps, made legible only in reverse, binding these actions to those, that freeway closure to those broken windows, those burned out automobiles.



(I think of this field devastatingly explicated by the expansion of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* to include persons recently killed by the police, including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott.)

So if *Heteronomy* is “about the Occupy movement,” as one commentator has it, *The Victorious Ones* does not yield its political coordinates, or it cannot yet yield its politics—the outcome is still uncertain, the terrain still shifting.

And then there are those questions we ask as homosexuals.

How might queer might be political in the post-revolutionary now?

What does homophobic violence mean?

How might shame be yielded?

“Shame interests me politically,” Eve Sedgwick wrote in 2003, revising her earlier essay from 1993, “because it generates and legitimates the place of identity—the question of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without without giving that identity space the standing of an essence. Shame—living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face—seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another. And the contagiousness of shame is only facilitated by its anamorphic, protean susceptibility to new expressive grammars.”

And you write in *The Victorious Ones*, speaking of “a Narnia of forms” tugging at you “from within this chidakasha backdoor in the mind”:

It's as though the ache in me to find substantiality subsides —  
The ache to find it in boy's bodies — to find it in the firmest earth on  
which to take a stand



That firm ground would never be enough against the weapon they have  
stashed in readiness against us — shame —  
Those hammer blows —

Shame operates as a force that delimits the legitimacy, the wholeness of the individual.

And you, the speaker of these poems, are so often racked by certain types of shame: that of the Obi Wan, that of the aesthete, that of the revolutionary.

I ask myself what you're teaching me about political shame, if it's my shame you are imagining, or only your own arising.

You write, "[t]here's a river running backward through this poem to the sources of our / struggle together," and I'm reminded that connection between the political struggles of sexual minorities and revolution remains tenuous and ambivalent, its articulation presently unarticulated.

Perhaps, in 2001, this articulation could be found in the Gothic-sexual-surreal, which could call forth ghosted eroticism, which has been so recently vanished.

In 2015, something else has been recently vanished, and you ask us, in the final section of your long poem, to look around and ask ourselves,

Which of these —

The innovators, profit-makers, the ones behind high walls...  
Or the ones with no ability to plan,  
Who live from hour to hour, year to year...  
Which of these will be the victorious ones?

This final unknown inspires the title of your long poem and it structures



your fantasies of the life of your child after the end of capital (“I’ve imagined you remembered at the end of a long life, circled by / friends beneath an empty sky”).

But true to Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, you unhook the politics of *The Victorious Ones* from a yet-to-come utopianism, emphasizing our own partisanship, our own part to play in this overcoming that language fails to recount in modes not mythic.

This is what *The Victorious Ones* glimpses: a post-revolutionary future anterior, the politics of what we can imagine to say of what will have happened.



**Joshua Clover**

*Red Epic*

Commune Editions, 2015

REVIEWED BY WILLIAM ROWE

***Red Epic*: ‘how to set fire to fire?’**

Epic is a difficult form for leftist poetry in our epoch, given the lack of a transcendent that partial struggles could echo. Communism is that idea, but in the now it lacks material force or place. Joshua Clover’s book is exceptional in this sense because it brings the force of the Oakland Occupation and General Strike into poetry. He writes, in ‘Tranche 1’,

I have lived through the end of syntax I have lived through the  
imperial grammars I have lived through the bursting of a bubble visible  
from space I have lived through the suicide of money to preserve the life of  
value I have lived through the fatal sacrifice of philosophy to avoid the jaws  
of the dialectic [ . . . ] I have stood atop a small hill with Mallarmé in one  
hand and in the other a cognitive balm and of what virtue were our pretty  
phrases against a thousand beautiful men standing in rank near the sunlit  
shore

The epic therefore exists at a limit, where literature — as it currently stands — stops because it encounters a force and a form outside it. Here is the aura or excessive effect of collective struggle and the fact that poetry can embody it maybe better than anything else. But the epic event, the objective dialectic of occurrence, becomes in time other than itself and breaks away from the subjective poetic of the moment: “the men are beautiful and the women are beautiful and we remember that we meant to come here and never leave we meant this over and over but it meant something else” (‘Tranche 2’). Two types of subject here, the one epic, the



other tinged by loss and melancholy, the second marks the predominant poetic subject of Clover's book.

The "something else" finds its fullest meaning in the relation between language and history: "To say it is a new era is to say / it has discovered a new style of time / we do / not do this in language / first but in terrain we have not chosen and do not yet / understand" ('Spring Georgic'). Then what needs to be done at this point? And, first of all, how to hold this point of scission between poetry and history? How does the poetry of this book carry the pressures under which it places itself? — the particular placing of itself which, precisely, makes it exceptional. And that generates another question that's necessary for our situation now: what are the makeable forms of artistic and political resistance? It's right that poetry should be asking the question.

"We do / not do this in language / first but in terrain we have not chosen," speaks of a limit of language within a Marxist sense of limits of present practice as involving 'circumstances [we] have not chosen.' So to reach, in this specific way, the limit of language is to exit from linguistic idealism (as, e.g. in Language poetry) into the terrain where poetry makes present what's not being named, where the limit of specific forms of expression is given in revolutionary practice.

Whether the poetry can sustain the pressure here indicated might be tested in various ways. Take the 'I'-form (or we-form), which is where becoming poetry and becoming subject coincide. The I, despite its militant engagement tends to float above ("atop a small hill") the incomplete specifics of struggle; it is sustained by poetic tradition and knowledge, where the former is marked by predilection for classical ("O capital") rhetoric and for self as wit, and the latter takes the form of the poem-essay. Poem as essay in the best instances (some really strong ones in this book, e.g. "Gilded Age") consists of dialectics, where the encounter with external limits becomes internal, producing a scission of the 'I'. So it's possible to say — having read *Red Epic* — that Frank O'Hara too practices the splitting of the I-form —



O'Hara being the point where Clover holds on to poetic tradition most intensely. But then it would also have to be said that where knowing, as relation with the outside (the city), is in O'Hara immersed in affect — this is what splits it — it can in Clover fall into mere speculative dexterity. In other words, what kind of ability is that? What's its place in political struggle? Isn't it a type of specialism, separated out from general intellect? How to deploy knowledge in poetry without it producing separation from struggle? This is our problem, as militant writers and readers, strongly presented by Clover.

Discourse, give us some discourse, is what society constantly demands (see Frank Wilderson on social death). In poetry, this demand coagulates as the wall of words that protects the poem and the living space it offers from outside forces. Literature. What breaks through it? Bliss, pain, and agitation; emotion and music.

The strong form of annihilation in *Red Epic* is riots and confidence in this form of destruction shapes its primary political belief. Here too a limit — to what petrol in Coca-Cola bottles can do — presents itself: “once fire is the form of the spectacle the problem / becomes how to set fire to fire?” How to set fire to fire? This magnificent phrase is the knot in which the tensions of *Red Epic* are most tightly compressed. It indexes the limits of annihilation as well as the desire that it should be complete. It expresses the question of our time. How so? This knot has several dimensions. The most obvious is the capacity of triumphant capitalism to re-appropriate any gesture of opposition. Spectacle but also the police. The difficulty becomes how to extend “riots fire and lootin” into revolution. These things ‘will’ happen ‘if there will be a revolution’: the grammatical torsion is notable, it doubles the force of the ‘if’, overcoming and not a syntactic — better, a temporal — block to revolution. “Fire is materialised time” (Hegel) so the question is about what obstaculates revolutionary time and what can feed it. And what can fuel the word and prevent it being exhausted? Just as words-concepts get both emptied and filled in Heraclitus's riotous dialectic.



In the end, *Red Epic* is more epigrammatic than epic: it condenses epochal time into the ephemeral moment. It does this formally with sentences that cross over themselves, rather than loosing themselves to a militant interlocutor, i.e. with statements inscribed in their own space of observation rather than that of political struggle.

Clover proposes that to vitalize language, poetry has to display the wreckage of old forms of expression: “language [ . . . ] must be cajoled / into open air / by dangling the old forms / in their wrack and wreckage.” Better than dangle, smash them against the present violence of social antagonism. And then? There’s a hiatus or missing segment of time at this point, and *Red Epic* leaps over it. “What true act would make every word in the dictionary political”: but aren’t they already? And again: “There will be a revolution or there will not. If the latter these poems were nothing but entertainments.” Isn’t poetry already entertainment or not (entertainment and not). And if there’s no revolution, won’t there be destruction of the earth? Why this stoical resignation? Is it the other side of the poem’s (possibly failed) wish to be the expression of revolution? Then yes, here is the struggle of leftist poetry, the other side of which is how the militant self can get elevated into ideality (“The revolution betrayed him / before he betrayed the revolution”: who is this Mayakovsky being referred to?), a stance that correlates with freezing revolution in one of its moments.

One of finest of the poems is “Gilded Age”. It’s driven by the double passion of revolution as annihilation and of loss of what the I loves. The highest intensity comes after a passage through Language poetry and out the other side into the real now of militant art, thought and action and of the crucial need for a new political subject: “I want to be honest about how much I love this all of this its pleasure is my pleasure and its wine is my wine [ . . . ] and I am holding this in mind as truth and measure when I say it must be annihilated not as text but really now.” Again, the bottom line is confidence in destruction, and the extent of what’s to be destroyed is fed by negation of the I’s present attachments. How far does that go.



In a poem that re-works one of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, there's this statement: "if you want // another review panel a Justice Dept / study a return to democracy rather than / for riot and looting to leap beyond / itself from county to county / rift to rift until it becomes general / you have not understood / what a revolution is it's just this". Confidence in destruction is accurate to the phase of nihilistic confinement that we are living through now. But if general riot does not move beyond itself to something like emancipatory will, will there be a revolution? If fire can be taken as the permanence of revolution (the absolute dialectic), doesn't general riot fall into the category of "adherence to one of the transit points of the social revolution against another" (Marx, *The Class Struggles in France*) . . . . Clover's poem rewrites one of di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters*, which ends, "ask for / everything." Isn't that the point.

Ok, different historical moments, and why shouldn't poetry take its stance from the current one? But revolution has a relation with transcendence. This comes across in an intense but also difficult way in the second poem of the book ("Years of Analysis for a Day of Synthesis"). Here the relation between poetry, history, and political will is taken to a high point, an epic point, something very hard to do in contemporary time: "who will take / the owners of debt / and make them whole / and who will take the shareholders / and make them whole / and who will take / the debauched and defaulted / and make them whole / and who will take / our brothers and sisters in the equity / and mezzanine tranches / and make them whole / and when will this end and really / what will be money's Jena" It's right that the transcendent should appear at this point of vast longing and multiple, colliding intersections. The legal meaning of 'make whole' is to pay back damages to the party who was damaged. The common meaning is to heal. But the phrase also has theological echoes ("a leper approached Jesus, fell to his knees, and pleaded, 'Jesus, if you want to, you can make me whole again,'" , Mark 1: 40). And it recalls Walter Benjamin's demand that the incompleteness of the past suffering of the oppressed should fuel revolution in the present. Yet shareholders are neither owed damages nor



sick nor oppressed. Is the longing for revolution to be preserved by irony? Or has it fallen back into general love? Neither is sufficient ...

The lines just quoted express political struggle as a shuddering and deeply contradictory demand. "How to set fire to fire?" is a question that rightly makes us shudder. How do we sustain ourselves in the incompleteness of total commitment? It's enough to smash you to pieces. *Red Epic* seeks to hold this place. But also — and this too is part of our time — it falls into confidence in a merely intensive logic of fire and its reversal into the loss of melancholy. The merely incremental fire, despite its apparent wildness, remains within the sphere of repetition. How to break out?



## Lucy Beynon and Lisa Jeschke

*David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs*

Shit Valley Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY DANNY HAYWARD

### STRONG LANGUAGE

Lucy Beynon and Lisa Jeschke's *David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs* is a half-hour-long play dedicated to the investigation of the question of whether sexual violence against the current UK Prime Minister would represent an effective form of political action.<sup>1</sup> It does not turn this investigation into a joke merely, a farcical resort at the edge of an empire of tastelessness, or treat the inquiry as a means only of demonstrating in a roundabout way the serious or incontestable truth that politicians, like capitalists, are nothing but 'character masks' for the social relations in which they are caught up. Nor even does it try to make its central premise into a cartoonishly graphic exemplification of a theoretical presupposition, for instance that sexual fantasies of one or another kind are or are not possessed of a particular political import or tendency. *David Cameron* is a significant work of art because it shreds and decomposes all three of these common modes of dealing with personalised and violent fantasies in radical political culture. It shows that all three attitudes are not only insipid or uninspiring because they assume that the representation of a desire for revenge can only ever stand in for something else (the fact of its own ineffectiveness, the real automaticity of capitalist social reproduction, the insurrectionary character of desire 'in general'); but also because they repress the kind of frantic psychic work required to take seriously in representation the contrary pressures induced by any transgressive, wrong, or disorderly impulse or sensation, or, what is the same thing, that they not only *present* a bad account of the relationship between desire and reality, imagination and action, but actively connive in the reproduction



of the conditions under which no other kind of account could ever be 'artistically' or humanly possible. Beynon and Jeschke's play is an investigation into the deadening of the relationship between desire and reality. This focus of attention does not make the play into a mere second-order exercise or treatise in methodology, but is the real life and the blood in the veins of its contempt for the social beneficiaries of existing social suffering, and of its desire for an artistic life not wasted in a condition of strenuously repressive and exhausting mental serenity. The play is constructed out of several discrete segments, not quite scenes, though any attempt to tell the exact number of these is inhibited by the aggressively shifting tempo of their performance. The most obvious local time-markers are the references to the Thatcher death parties that took place in Brixton, Liverpool and elsewhere in April 2013,<sup>2</sup> but while in the main the dramas of state violence and its projective normalisation are shut into a familiarly national idiom (*Upstairs Downstairs* for High Frequency Traders), the source materials for the play frequently display a rival influence. The second of the play's 'scenes' is an edited recapitulation of the opening section of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, performed in super-sedative slow-motion as if to compensate for a lack of sepia tints, while another deracinates Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* from its setting in feudal Saxony in order to resituate it in an anonymous 'border control point' – a more intensively policed threshold that could be in Heathrow or the disputed territories of the Ukraine. This compounding of English politics and German literary history is self-evidently 'a move,' or, in other words, a conscious decision, and for this it might understandably be accused of being 'clever' in the pejorative sense appropriate to public school children and tax avoidance schemes, if only it weren't for the fact that the tone of much of the work is so monumentally crude as to make Barry MacSweeney's disturbing pornographic poems about Margaret Thatcher seem like chaste lyrics of compliment composed as inserts for the prayer book of Immanuel Kant himself.<sup>3</sup> The roughness or crudeness of the juxtapositions is itself telling. The stance that the play adopts towards its component materials is to the value of skilful construction roughly what the Book of Revelations is to



the annual supranational meeting of the European Court of Auditors. Different types of political or literary material are not included for the purpose of grand displays of cultivated erudition but are thrown together hastily by two writers who feel themselves compelled, and who have no wish superciliously to conceal the fact that they are compelled, to lay hold of all of the materials to which they have access. The main picturesque contrast in the play is nevertheless not a contrast of literary history but a contrast of psychological attitudes. The segments themselves often concern the narrative of a professional performer and her “unskilled” short-term contract dancer, Pawel. Together the two make up a “pop duo,” “a small outfit” that is also “just big in a different size” (p.6), and therefore a kind of diagram of the Small to Medium Enterprises that Large to Monopolistic English proprietors have been talking up ever since the yeomanry came into fashion back when the UK was a kind of third-tier absolute monarchy. Within this clinical-entrepreneurial setting, we learn that the unnamed main character, played by Beynon, “sort of love[s]” David Cameron, though during much of the play she is also engaged in a reflective discussion of whether it would be possible to exact revenge upon him for “his act” by means of “the proper war weapon of rape” (p.8). Her violent sadism and its autotuned vicissitude into self-annihilating identification is then provided with a counterpoint in Pawel’s passive masochism, performed at the play’s close by means of a long and disturbing dance sequence that occurs after the ‘singer’ has quit the stage; a mime routine that is so preternaturally psychotic that not even Eurovision would be able to stretch itself to accommodate it. Out of the singer’s aim-inhibited sadism and Pawel’s aimless masochism are drawn the psychic raw materials for a ‘minor’ act that must be made to measure up to the fantasy that David Cameron is larger than the damage he inflicts, and therefore to outrace the predictable conclusion that “his *act*” will always be able to assign our *actions* to some minor role or subplot in a theatre in which he is the impresario. This constructive view of psychic irresolution is essential to the work and makes up the soft centre of its core values. Beynon and Jeschke do not offer to their viewers a catalogue



of readymade political ‘ideal types’ with the order-numbers all ready to be jotted down. Their play forgoes the psychoanalytical account of political desire in which the compound of oedipal love and hatred is destined to be adaptively split off into authoritarian identification and inarticulate rage towards another: *Führer* to the left of me, Jew or communist or homosexual to the right (or vice versa).<sup>4</sup> And this indecisiveness is important, because it would at least have been possible to write a play in which the main ‘lesson’ was that, *ultimately*, the politics of revenge against the ‘Zeitgeist’ or symbol of oppression reverses into a docile love relation or is enclosed in it like a patient strung out on diazepam in a waiting room. *David Cameron* does in fact contain this conclusion, but since the conclusion does not come last or get invested with the character of a sensible ultimatum, it merely ends up seeming like an afterthought or offshoot; a by-product of the work thrown off into an incidental punchline: “So to conclude, I don’t think raping David Cameron would work. Besides, I sort of love him.” This thought arrives on page 10 of a text 23 pages in length and is of course no conclusion at all. It does not release us into the night where we can sort of nod our heads in agreement like yoyos in a washing machine but instead turns us back into the play itself, into its conception of *work*, which is itself an unstable compound in which *working through* is forever liable to be frozen into “a job well done,” one of the one hundred and eleven things that Beynon declares that she “loves” on pages eleven and twelve, in a great list of dubious love objects crammed together like inmates shoehorned into an overnight cell. Probably the psychological category that would be best suited to describe all of this is ambivalence, but what Beynon and Jeschke do with this category needs to be specified quite carefully. The two characters at the centre of *David Cameron* are split off halves of a single integral unity like the two characters at the centre of Brecht’s *Seven Deadly Sins of the Petty Bourgeoisie*; and each proves to be ambivalent in turn in the mode of expression he or she adopts. This judgment would imply a particular focus of argument. Ambivalence is a state convenient for inducing social quiescence, because, as Wilhelm Reich already recognised the best part of a century ago, and as



has been repeated by psychoanalysts of all tendencies ever since, “to be non-political [or to be positively undecided – DH] is not, as one might suppose, evidence of a passive psychic condition, but of a highly active attitude.”<sup>5</sup> Beynon and Jeschke’s play might be thought to evince a basic solidarity with this idea, that states of apparently placid indecision are wasteful or exhausting; but their argument is also more complex than this, because it maintains that the attempt to *deny* ambivalence, as well as to maintain oneself in it, is itself intensely exhausting and subjectively destructive. The play *David Cameron* recognises two species of such denial, first in the attempt to imagine that we can ‘mount’ or harness feelings of intense hatred in order to achieve our political goals *without* suffering the experience of vicissitude or reversal (this is fantasy of an insurrectionist who cannot acknowledge barriers to expressive intensity and so never succeeds in getting past them), but also and more singularly in the idea that, by recognising the reproduction of ambivalence in the effort to *fabricate* a sensation adequate to the situation in which we find ourselves, the way is open to us to reconceive radical politics, and its relationship to art, without consuming ourselves in a storm of efforts to accomplish our own decisive self-fashioning. This second idea is also a denial of ambivalence because it appears to be based on a more intelligently conscious recognition of it. It sees that in the effort to *make* ourselves entertain a particular feeling or desire, we do nothing but establish the conditions in which the opposite feeling can come to expression; and it repudiates this violent struggle with the self as a reproduction of ambivalent psychic attitudes at a higher order of intensity. For the sophisticated denier of the wasteful logic of psychological ambivalence, the first step to the restoration of lost psychological energies is the recognition of the fact that ambivalence cannot be fought against by means of the attempt to identify ourselves with some extreme attitude or feeling. What is to be gained by forcing ourselves into mental situations where we suffer the feelings we wish to oppose *more* and not *less* acutely? Could the struggle against one’s basic psychological tendency ever be more than an elaborate species of self-harm? In answering these questions,



Beynon and Jeschke argue that the attempt to mount or harness strong desire *is* vain, self-destructive, and formidably counter-productive *and that it is still worth undertaking* – that the conscious recognition of the ambivalence of the attitude does not free up psychological energy but only conceals its profusion beneath an umbrella-apparatus of well-adjusted psychological insight. The adoption of this position in one of the play's great risks. It is its most brutal and committed challenge to a culture of people who it genuinely and vibrantly loathes, who find in their own equanimity an exit from wasted energies shaped like the utility-maximising grown-ups that they believe themselves to have become, or who can tell themselves that they have been liberated from the belief that that they need to *make themselves* feel something by the reassuring analytical precept that says that this labour of self-production or self-manipulation is something that is only done by people who are trying unsuccessfully to fend off an impulse of an equal and opposite tendency. The argument is a risk because it is perverse and cannot be proven – we cannot prove that those who see in the effort to fabricate adequate sensation merely a *heightening* of ambivalence and an *intensification* of unproductive internal conflict are themselves the most damaged and self-wasting subjects of all; or that the injunction to desist in forcing subjective attitudes is more akin to the psychotic fantasy of violent revenge than the performance that strains actually to inhabit that fantasy and therefore to impel us to contemplate it as a real possibility, rather than a joke or an allegory of a provocation. The play exposes this attempt to escape from ambivalence as a false inference from the correct recognition that all efforts to fight against subjective ambivalence raise ambivalence to a higher level of intensity. It constructs out of the vicissitudes to which it exposes itself the rudiments or outlines of a consciously transformative political language.<sup>6</sup> This language is naturally energetic. Everywhere in the play text internal conflict is permitted to run riot in the folds and involutions of a 'basic' conversational syntax. From the very first passage in which the rape of David Cameron is tabled and then withdrawn, Beynon's grammar decomposes into a particle-storm of competing time-markers: "Rape



would be such a fully hateful forceful expression of now in the most unresistant, acquiescent way, it makes terrible sense, now, it's reactionary, and even then, even if I raped him back, it would still be so small compared to his act." (8) Rape as a fantasy of revenge for inflicted social damage is an expression of "now," a condensation of its salient features as expressive as flared jeans in the early 1970s or monocles in the 1910s. The hypotactic run-on clause that proceeds from this gross metonymy inserts the same word but trusses it up in commas, *now*, as if by way of emphasis, refuting pre-emptively the still unarticulated objection that it was just as bad *then* or else that things aren't going to get better any time *soon*, only then for the thought to wander off in just the direction that it had seemed definitely to prohibit, veering into the adverbial phrase "even then" as if in flight from its own basic instincts. "[E]ven then" would indicate a qualifying circumstance ('even in this situation') rather than a time reference, but no anterior qualifying circumstance has been specified, which is why the speaker is forced to clarify by adding another phrase ("even if I raped him back"); a gloss that does not abate but that reinforces the temporal sense (the presence of the past) precisely because it seems anxiously calculated to deny it or otherwise to ward it off. None of the untidiness of this apostrophe is incidental to what is being said or divisible from the progress of its 'argument.' In the first instance this is because disputes about what is politically singular about the present moment are *always* accompanied by the anxiety that claims to novelty are deluded (that in truth we are in the same miserable place that we always were); and also because what is being proposed or canvassed by Beynon and Jeschke is premised on the paradoxical idea that what is particularly novel, fresh, or 'progressive' about our situation is the potential it affords for violent and uncontrollable regression. Logical *argument* in the passage slides back into temporal *description* because of the play's more encompassing practical commitment, to the truth that what we want for ourselves *now* cannot in any circumstances be disaggregated from *who we are* or from the floor where we make our bids. And at the bottom of this reversal is a problem to do with the meaning of confidence. If our "act" is "so small," as Beynon's



character admits that it would have to be *even if* it were to endorse with absolute furious certitude a gesture of the most “hateful” or “forceful” violence, is this because according to some felicitic calculus it achieves a negligible score in relation to never-ending fiscal ‘austerity,’ the falsified statistics for benefits or sweatshop suicides, or is it because the confidence that the act is capable of artifice, the ferocity that it can bring to expression, and the violence that it can compass and publicly imagine, are all ultimately available only to people who have elected to regress into a ‘realm’ of fantasy — a private theatre in which the active performer (Beynon) and the passive one (Jeschke) will always function as mirror images and never as real and practical alternatives? What kind of act could make the performance of confidence something more than a masque of anxiety — something more than the artifice of self-assurance that only works while we inhabit the theatre and even then tends to appear like the mimicry of a delusion? The idea that extreme acts in art are “small” because they are imaginative and not real is part of what today passes for cultural common sense. It is a main actor in the process through which psychological self-harm is transformed into a model of ‘aesthetic experience.’ In March 2015, the novelist Marina Warner, Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, restated some of these positions in the *London Review of Books* in an article titled ‘Learning My Lesson.’<sup>7</sup> The text, which is mainly given over to detailing vorarephiliac measurement practices in UK Higher Education institutions, and was occasioned by Warner’s resignation from the University of Essex, reminds us that fiction “gives you permission” to do what you ought not to do, and is thus essential to the process through which flexible and tolerant citizens are nurtured into poll booths and civil society organisations. Warner recalls in this connection the improving advice she once dispensed to a “young Emirati Arab” in her creative writing class: “it isn’t you speaking but someone whose voice you are making up as you write, so you are free — or rather you can be more free there, in that space of imagination — to think around things, exploring possibilities.” This will seem, and in fact also is, a quite standard representation of the ‘autonomy’ of the imagination



and the different order of moral values to which it ought to be held to account. It is the vision of the 'freedom of the mind,' or of the artistic imagination, that has been common to liberal writers seeking an accommodation with constituted power ever since Coleridge disavowed the regicidal wishes that he had actively promoted in his earliest poetry, on the basis that he was 'merely' imagining them. Most of us who think of this position in Warner's article as an idle and politically noxious cliché will feel our eyes glazing over or drifting towards the next sentence. But it is worth pausing here, since her patrician benevolence is also possessed of its own peculiar ambivalence, its own domestic economy of subjective energies; and because this is exactly the type of psychological attitude which I think that Beynon and Jeschke are working to bring into view. The 'freedom' of the imagination, which is based on an abjection of personality, or on the disowning of the desires that are imputed to a character, does not open up a space of total license, an orgy of desublimations in the closing down sale of the unconscious, but only makes us, more cautiously, "more free," incrementally less unfree than we might be in the field of our quotidian undertakings in the authoritarian UAE or its near anagram the University of Essex. Why Warner thinks this qualification is significant is not easy to say. It could be because she is aware that the idea of the 'total' freedom of the imagination is a preposterous romantic fantasy suitable only to be transferred onto china crockery retailed in craft outlets in the home counties; or because she wants to invest the idea with some atmosphere of psychological plausibility; or because she thinks, in the best tradition of liberal colonialism, that 'total freedom' is something for which "young Arab Emirati" women aren't yet ready, and that they first need some time to mature under the patient and benevolent tutelage of a figure whose own separation of 'imagination' and 'reality,' just like the separation of executive and legislative powers in the state where she is a citizen, is more institutionally advanced. Perhaps all of these possibilities mount up to the same thing. Nevertheless the ambiguity of the diagnosis maintains its own independent value. Warner doesn't say why the 'freedom' of the



imagination should be qualified or circumscribed, and the ultimate significance of this omission is that the circumscription comes to appear as if it were, or at least as if it could be, free floating or merely self-evidently justifiable. There is no reason to ask why we need to be “more free” and not free altogether, because the readership to whom Warner addresses her plea for “Western liberal values” has already performed the psychic work necessary to accept that the separation of imagination and action is inert and anyway not worth fighting against. It is the fundamental accomplishment of the culture in whose defence articles like ‘Learning My Lesson’ are written that the lessening of subjective intensity encapsulated in the idea that the “imagination” is at once split off *and* recuperable, “more free” *and* constrained, appears as a description of how things naturally are and *not* as the result of a process of repressive self-enfeeblement. The pseudo-drama of the liberation of the ‘Arab’ in our liberal university system is important to this conception, and no doubt constitutes a happy reassurance for those who also know what excellent fees Emirati Arabs will pay in order to be liberated;<sup>8</sup> but the more fundamental reason why the effort of mental conception has no place in this worldview is that the repression of effort is the aim that it labours most strenuously to accomplish. Anyone who tries to make herself feel something she doesn’t want, or to want something she doesn’t feel, is from this perspective engaged not in making ‘art’ but in perversely reproducing the conditions of repressive civil society in general or of wage labour in particular, electively degrading herself just like the women who outrageously allow themselves to be employed in the coke heaps in South Wales in the 1860s:

I love female night shift workers. They quote quote are exposed to the deterioration of character, arising from their loss of self-respect unquote unquote. Strength of language varies directly with deterioration of character in that as one’s bodily commitment increases, as you spend more blood on keeping someone else’s private pension wet with it, the language which is summoned to stem and then counter that blood loss must strengthen.<sup>9</sup>



This quotation of a quotation in Marx belongs to the most intense passage of *David Cameron* and to the segment in which the problems of liberal constraint are addressed with the most focused and explicit energy.<sup>10</sup> The inverse correlation that it sets up like an economics textbook between “[s]trength of language” and “deterioration of character” does not just assert a relationship between language (or the kinds of fantasies we express with it) and anything so gruesome and abstract an object of academic dissertations as ‘the Body.’ Instead it argues that the effort to surface the imagined desires that we are compelled to have, rather than the ones we are encouraged to consume, and to stare these down or to live with them, is the first step in freeing ourselves from the state of dimly habitualised ambivalence in which we unconsciously waste and discard our energies up to the point where it seems as if we are by nature perfectly serene. The prefabricated identity of ‘strong language’ and ‘bad language’ arises naturally out of this scene of repressive injunctions like methane from a heap of manure. It is the ubiquitous disciplinary proceeding used to tell certain kinds of people that it is bad *for them* to be strong, both in the diagnostic sense that it leads to pathologies or sensations of conscious discomfort and in the theocratic sense that says that *they* ought to remain in their place so help me God. To make “bodily commitment” “stem and then counter” the loss of blood and desire and life that is *prerequisite to* and not *excluded by* the conscious experience of serenity means not only *to work* but also to acknowledge the effects of the work that we have already been made to do, the psychic repetitive strain injuries of living in a world where everyone is on call round the clock whether in or out of work or in the churned up and constantly expanding no man’s land that defines the space in between. Beynon and Jeschke’s point is not the simple minded and common one that actual social misery is in the end ‘worse than’ bad language, so that those who castigate bad language are cultivators of indifference to actual “bodily” or social human suffering; this idea, which has been done to death by serene theoreticians who know absolutely nothing about the kind of fight involved to live intensely in a world that constantly preaches the imaginative or restorative value of



‘more’ (but not too much more) creative freedom, is really not so different from the conception of ‘the mind’ prosily threnodised by old world liberal colonialists like the novelist Marina Warner. Beynon and Jeschke’s point is rather that the fight for sensations that are strong and weak at once, compassionate and aggressive, cannot occur without a struggle that not only opens us to damage but which actively threatens to induce it. “Deterioration” is not only *historical*; the labour that is necessary actually to face into the fact of it requires of us that we accept its extension in ourselves; and only in the concerted and unstoppable effort to make our desires and our actions bend towards one another is it possible to imagine a situation where the fucking economics textbook with its fixed and predictable relationships might blur or flame up into the medical manual in which blood loss can not only be “stem[med]” but also “counter[ed],” can also flow *back into* the body, not in inverse correlation to anything but in defiance of all relationships that we have ever been taught to know.

When Beynon and Jeschke write, and when Beynon yells, “THEN WHAT IS AN OBJECTION TO STRONG LANGUAGE?” (p.13), the assertion does not mean (although by anyone who is not listening it may always ‘be read’ to mean), that we should resist the moral imperative of proportionality that is always asserted by those whose own actions exceed any scale of ordinary moral language. What it really means, which is to say, what it means more intensely and uniquely, is that it is only when language itself becomes exhausting, and not merely a reflection on exhaustion, or a complaint about our orders of priority, that it can really begin to articulate just how much human life is wasted in a world in which the pathology that forces people to acquiesce to their smallness is forever being rammed into the idea of ‘culture’ itself like a storm into a high-security teacup. In March 2015, in the dreary run up to another general election, in which state politicians will talk indefatigably about how much we need to save for the future, Beynon and Jeschke’s play reminds us that our most significant acts do not occur periodically according to a calendar determined at the convenience of our ruling classes, but fitfully



and beautifully and counter to our best habits and educated expectations. They cannot happen over and over again forever, because they require of us an expenditure of life and instinct that is frightening and painful and sometimes damaging to undergo. The great accomplishment of the “small act” *David Cameron* throughout all of its vicissitudes and inevitable reverses is that it makes the real inevitability of large collective acts of this kind feel undoubtable in a period in which the pressure to doubt them is ferocious and hatefully ubiquitous and unabating.

---

<sup>1</sup> A video of a performance from 26 June 2014, at the Betsey Trotwood theatre in Clerkenwell, is available on Youtube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uhG7iOAmoE>. A handsome play-text has recently been published by Shit Valley and is available to be knee-deep in for £2.50 (postage inclusive) at: <http://shitvalley.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> “When Thatcher died, all the people celebrating at the spontaneous street parties – the media said they were violent. Which they were, because they knew, on a physical, fleshly, cellular level, Margaret Thatcher was, Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister” (p.16). E.g.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikhRGrJReJ8>.

<sup>3</sup> In MacSweeney’s poems from the late 70s and early 80s the violence of state performance tends to be fully occluded, or perfectly sublimed into the violence wished against the politician Thatcher, with the result that there remains no remainder, however synecdochical or vestigial or symbolist, of what prompts fantasised violence in the first place. The cycle of part objects becomes everything.

<sup>4</sup> This is the pattern developed in (for example) Wilhelm Reich’s *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, though Reich’s dreary conception of upstanding genital health inclines him to emphasise passive submission to a Führer over active hatred for an outsider or other as the principle characteristic of fascist psychology. The opposite emphasis is given in Adorno and Horkheimer’s chapter on anti-Semitism in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979), where experiences of subordination are always merely preludes to intense desires for revenge: “the hatred of the led [...] knows no bounds” (p.171).

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. Mary Boyd Higgins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.233.



<sup>6</sup> The distinctions in the preceding two paragraphs are perhaps lamely super-refined and are certainly inadequate to their object. But the same point could just as easily be made by describing the experience of intense and moving writing, which can only be produced by someone who is willing to force her or himself into a state that is hurtful, exhausting and unsustainable. The aesthetics that attempts to deny ambivalence is based on the false assumption that our true desires are desires that we can have sustainably *all the time*; but this is a wretched lie whose intellectual basis is the conflation of desires with subjective constants like skills, experiences, certification, and other objects that are capable of being anatomised into bullet points on the covering letter of a CV.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Warner, 'Learning My Lesson,' *London Review of Books*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (19 March 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Holographic Arabs have of course always participated in the light shows of reassuring cultural stereotypes beamed onto the dungeon wall nearest to the bestsellers torture rack fitted out with the latest middlebrow thumbscrews; and so it's no surprise that you get a "more free" one with each subscription to the *LRB*.

<sup>9</sup> *David Cameron: A Theatre of Knife Songs*, p.13. The rest of the segment runs: "[...] When this organised country rips your heart out of your chest and uses it to supplement his own beating campaign for flesh, THEN WHAT IS AN OBJECTION TO STRONG LANGUAGE? In the face of that act Fuck the man that does that. Fuck him not with the tenderness of parodic loving sex play, but fuck him like they say Dworkin thought every fuck fucked. Fuck him in the face that soft-powered poverty into itself. Fuck him in the hands that write the speeches, fuck him in the fleshless mouth that speaks them. Rip him a cunt of his own invention and let him see how that compares to a cunt of human flesh, loudly throbbing. Fuck his gash. It's nothing like mine. He has sorely misunderstood. And to call for calm, for gentler terms, is cultural Cameron."

<sup>10</sup> The quote is from the Fourth Report of the Children's Employment Commission, given in a footnote in *Capital* Volume I, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, 50 Vols (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004), Vol. 35, p.264: "Both in Staffordshire and in South Wales young girls and women are employed on the pit banks and on the coke heaps, not only by day but also by night. This practice has been often noticed in Reports presented to Parliament, as being attended with great and notorious evils. These females employed with the men, hardly distinguishable from them in their dress, and begrimed with dirt and smoke, are exposed to the deterioration of character, arising from the loss of self-respect, which can hardly fail to follow from their unfeminine occupations." This argument prompts anger because it affects to speak about "deterioration" in the labour process as if it were a purely moral phenomenon; but the reason I think it is interesting to Beynon and Jeschke is that its transgression of a common sense distinction ("deterioration" is a strictly physical fact) at once mirrors and reduces to a kind of despicable joke the same kind of transgression as the one they themselves are determined to carry out, against the idea that 'art' must in the end have absolutely nothing in common with 'real' experiences of damage or exhaustion or suffering.



## Marie Buck

*Portrait of Doom*

Krupskaya, 2015

REVIEWED BY DAVID W. PRITCHARD

Marie Buck's *Portrait of Doom* intervenes into a host of conversations about poetics and politics, which for better or worse all take up the antinomies furnished by Language poetry for the critique of representation in poetry. Buck takes these antinomies—the opposition between lyric and experimental poetry, for instance, or that between a quietist and a vanguardist poetic community—and refuses them any ontological status, casting them instead as representational choices above all else. It's a powerful estrangement, one that throws into relief not only the difficulty of talking about political poetry, but the striking continuity between, say, the polemics from  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  and the so-called poetics of witness that displaces rather than contends with all the difficulty involved in narrating political commitment in art.

To put it another way: Marie Buck doesn't think poetry is "praxis," even though it does have political things to do and say. She also seems deeply suspicious of certain dissimulations of poetic and political immediacy. In this she closely resembles Jack Spicer, whom I don't want to dwell on too much, but whose poetics inform *Portrait of Doom* in a significant way. The legacy of the older poet stands or falls on the way he rejected poetry's ability to change the world, which he associated with the kinds of direct statements one finds in Beat poetry that he often lampooned. Buck is a bit kinder to politics, and a good deal more hopeful about them; even so, she takes from Spicer a critical skepticism about politics, and from this she sets out to refuse any poetics that would seek to assuage its own guilt by making claims for itself that just aren't true. The Spicerian vision is dim, but has a kernel of truth to it: naming immiseration on a global scale doesn't combat it, it



only affirms that “people are starving,” and when you know that, what do you know?

Buck does not only take a tone from Spicer. Her poems repeatedly invoke what Spicer called the poetics of dictation, which insists on the poet’s inextricability from commodity society by locating the source of language and of poetry *outside* of the poet. In Spicer the figure for this is the radio; Buck prefers the computer, which importantly metonymizes *the internet*. The language of these technologies cuts across any easy sense of the autonomy of a poem’s speaker we might want to find. Thus this passage from “Scope of Emotions”:

and debt my biggest concern  
and I learned how to make out  
and I learned how to draw  
and I learned how to tie a tie  
and I learned how to lose weight  
and I learned how to ask a girl out  
and I learned how to add fractions  
and I learned how to age a steak  
and I learned how to hardboil an egg  
and I learned how to lucid dream  
in my own dark vision  
alphabetizing in Word  
I learned how to kiss myself without pain,  
inside the kill site I kissed and kissed  
all of my oceans’ dead and wounded,  
brilliantly executed, several kinds of touch  
in the warmth of the freshly deceased. (47-8)

The litany of things the speaker learned how to do brings to mind the way search engines predict our queries and suggest popular searches to us before we’ve finished typing out what we want to search. Whether or not these are



actual search engine queries is immaterial: the point is that the form comes from elsewhere, from *outside* the poet, who must then arrange or organize the language accordingly. But computers have ways to do this arranging for us, too; Buck's word processor does the work for her, or so she says, since the list doesn't seem organized "alphabetically" in any meaningful way (except that the queries beginning with "a" are all together, but there's three of them, and ask-add-age is not an alphabetical arrangement of those three words).

So far this redaction of "dictation" is quite literal, but Buck does not content herself with drawing language from the internet. She modifies and remediates it when she writes that "I learned how to kiss myself without pain," a phrase I googled, and which Google suggested I didn't actually mean to Google. "Did you mean *how* to kill *myself without pain*?" asked the search engine. Grisly, sure, but interesting as far as the poetry's concerned. Buck has switched things around, intervened in the language of the internet-outside and made clear that what appears at first blush to be a critique of the short, discursive lyric poem ends up extending the possibility of lyric, emphasizing its ability to include parataxis and disjunction as part of the feelingful utterance that it mounts and formalizes.

The pun on "execute" here seems decisive: it means to put into effect and oftentimes appears as a way of describing computers running processes. It also means to put to death in an authorized, perhaps state-sanctioned way. Both of these meanings are at play in this stanza, in ways that make clear that computers themselves are predicated on death. They are dead labor, they are, in a sense, someone else's death sentence, in ways that are not just a figure for exploitation. People died to make this computer. But this is not to say Buck aestheticizes violence to antagonize her reader, or—perhaps even worse—to confess her own complicity, to express her guilt as a way of letting herself off the hook. Like Spicer, she resents intonations of political purity or moral exemption. I have quoted from the end of "Scope of Emotions"; the poem preceding these stanzas offers a ludic version of a



poetics of self-loathing and self-flagellation, in which the poet “die[s] early in the splendid and serene light” and has the “immediate reaction [...] Hell has a new resident.” She writes,

I could’ve been chopped up and fed to a herd of pigs,  
I don’t know,  
I think I could’ve been thrown from the back of an aircraft carrier.  
They could’ve hung my body like the body of a fascist  
losing control of myself [...] (47)

Buck does not derive a moral sentiment from these gruesome descriptions. She carries them to a tasteless conclusion—if I am going to benefit from the exploitation of others I’m just as bad as Mussolini—and doesn’t flinch as she turns this into the self-deprecation of “losing control of myself,” which compares the violence of the images to the flailing of a hanged and dying body. It’s as much Plath as Spicer; it makes it possible, in fact, to think Plath and Spicer in the same thought, as part of the same story of North American poetry. So much for anti-expressivism *and* expressivism, terms that no longer quite seem to work to frame a debate about what political work poetry does.

And even if poetry is not praxis, it *does* political work. The line that links the dangling fascist bodies to the Google search pastiche/collage is “and debt my biggest concern”: in terms of this poem certainly a pun on “death,” a deflation of lyric’s historical association with ruminations about the finitude of human life; but at the same time “debt” announces a different sort of relationship to “learning,” one mediated by institutions. For what learning, today, is possible without debt? It’s not that Buck’s book stands or falls on the fact that she is a PhD candidate, but she includes this fact of a highly contingent access to institutions as a mediation, something that affects how she constructs her poems and that she does not attempt to suppress. Again, in this use of “debt” the link between the suffering of others and the conditions that make possible something like matriculation in a university



materialize: Buck can't just wish (or write) away the fact that she benefits from violence and death. She doesn't try to; she includes it in her poems, such that the fact that people are starving is not something we have to take a moral position on but rather a *fact* of the world in which this poetry happens. It is neither true nor false, good nor bad; it simply *happens*, it is.

In calling exploitation and the internet “facts,” I don't mean that Buck views them as things that are here to stay. If anything, the poetics of collage and appropriation—techniques I would want to group under the larger heading of parataxis—register the contingency of these things, allowing Buck to intervene into them in ways that underscore the possibility that they might be transformed. Read in this way, Buck's frequent descriptions of mutilated or malfunctioning bodies sound a bathetic Utopian note. The possibility for the body to be hacked up or reconfigured in space and time—as a matter of mutilation or as a matter of its orientation toward other bodies, which here frequently are the bodies of the police or of financiers and bankers—can be taken as an allegory for the possible bringing-together of multiple bodies under such conditions, a collective organization of some kind that makes possible a direct antagonism against those who have a serious stake in the continuation of exploitation, of mutilation.

In other words, the gaps that parataxis instantiates into the poems—the elided transitions between moments, the leaps from thing to thing—allow us to take stock of a human activity, some minimal agency that has to do both with the making of the poems (Buck is responsible for the disjunctions, not the Outside) and with their political energy. It's not so much that *Portrait of Doom* naively “believes” in the promise of human activity, but rather that Buck chooses to construct the book from a standpoint that importantly takes that activity into consideration: a representational, rather than an ontological, choice. This is the point at which she departs from Spicer, who is nothing if not invested in the possibility of doing ontological work with poetry. Buck comes closer to the anti-ontology of the Objectivists, but in a way that preserves something of a Spicerian skepticism, a desire to “stay loose”



as he says in his lectures, that undermines many of the presuppositions of the debates on poetics in our current conjuncture. *Portrait of Doom* doesn't try to change the world, and in this it is all the more committed to the importance of changing the world. For Marie Buck leaves off at the point where the only possible solution to the problems traced in her poems is the negation of the world that occasions those problems. This point—where poetics can only state the urgency of political praxis, rather than stand in for it—seems as urgent a place as any for a renewed conversation about the relationship between politics and aesthetics to begin.



## Wendy Walters

*Troy, Michigan*

Futurepoem, 2014

REVIEWED BY KRISTIN PALM

Many years ago, when I had just finished college, I lived briefly in Troy, Michigan. I was working a low-paying publishing job, and I shared a one-bedroom apartment with a friend in a sprawling complex on 16 Mile, more commonly known as Big Beaver Road. Across the eight-lane divided thoroughfare sat a Perry Drugs (now Rite Aid), to which we always drove. I took up roller blading, as the parking lots of the neighboring office complexes beckoned with their boundless, freshly blacktopped vistas. Each weekday morning, I would drive to a Kroger grocery store on Long Lake (aka 18 Mile) to catch a commuter van into Detroit. In these early morning hours, and again on my drive home, I would catch a glimpse of the suburb's more bucolic side—tidy ranch houses and Colonials set amidst remnants of the wooded expanse they had replaced. This existence was the opposite of the urbane life I had dreamed for myself, and my experience was thankfully fleeting. When I return to my old stomping grounds, it is to visit the REI or Nordstrom Rack that have sprung up behind my old residence.

My loose personal connection to Troy, Michigan is only part of what makes *Troy, Michigan* such a poignant read. Troy, Michigan could be anywhere, after all. *Troy, Michigan*, on the other hand, is Wendy S. Walters' own richly nuanced world, imbued with experiences, sensibilities, indignities and ironies that are hers alone. This is one writer's account of a place, to be sure. More so, though, it is an examination of the fears and desires, perverse and otherwise, that shaped that place and of their impact on the individual and collective psyche. (It is also, it should be noted, an exquisite collection of sonnets.)



Founded in 1929, in part for purposes of distilling alcohol, Troy remained a small farming community through the 1950s, according to Walters' account. ("Anyone here might/have been kin until 1955 when planners drew/a map of a city over a town," she writes.) Like most American suburbs, its late-century expansion was abetted by a fatal combination of ill-informed urban planning and irrational urban fear. Yet in this particular case, suburbia held its own grave terror. Throughout the 1970s, families in Troy and surrounding suburbs lived in very real trepidation of the Oakland County Child Killer, who kidnapped and murdered four young children on four separate occasions, leaving their bodies in the snow. One can't help but read race into the fact that, to this day, you will hear suburbanites routinely express their fears of largely African American Detroit, but you never hear anyone say, "Stay away from Troy." Walters alludes to this sad irony by juxtaposing Detroit's 1967 rebellion/riots and the murders (giving more weight to the latter, as it was no doubt etched more deeply in her young mind). But it is her accounts of the ways race played out in the classroom, on the playground and in the neighborhood that are the most acute. ("Private access/converts bigots into quiet neighbors," she writes.) Like Whitman, from whom she borrows, Walters is a master of song and imagery. The minimalist musicality with which she tells her tales—the classmate who, when drawing, "turned her into shadow" (and the mother who "gasped" and "re-drew her daughter brown"); a cancelled play date due to "our girl being black"; the thought that "*maybe my face is wrong*"—only deepens the cuts.

It can be easy to forget that inside cookie cutter homes and along uniform cul-de-sacs are living, breathing people with living, breathing lives. Their stories, and the stories of the places they create, are essential. "Anywhere/else gets an epic, why not us?" Walters asks. And so, we "[s]tart with some common interests in escape," and move temporally through a town of dirt and gravel roads to one that merits four exits on the interstate, and yet where "we find/the best of us is us plus us . . ."



Walters is cunning in her language and her associations (“... her pen/  
dangerously sharp to her eyes”):

One plan for the city, though not approved,  
involved building a downtown of business  
and housing units. A fear of mixed-use  
space reflected mistrust, a solitude  
philosophy. . . .

Like the city drawn over the town, these poems are deeply layered. But Walters’ linguistic economy creates vivid directional markers, clear indicators of how we arrived *here* from *here*. There is no getting off the hook. Walters’ incisiveness—of language, of form, of observation—illuminates a suburb in America and, in doing so, illuminates America. *Troy, Michigan* is revelatory, heart wrenching and very real. It’s mapmaking of the best kind.



## Lorine Neidecker

*Lake Superior: Lorine Niedecker's Poem and Journal, Along with Other Sources, Documents, and Readings*  
Wave Books, 2014

REVIEWED BY LINDA RUSSO

### **“but you whiz by”: A Consideration of Slow Reading & Textual Curating Inspired by *Lake Superior***

I've had quite a journey in thinking about what to make of *Lake Superior: Lorine Niedecker's Poem and Journal, Along with Other Sources, Documents, and Readings*. At first I was captivated by this gathering of texts, as I think most readers will be. Then I was puzzled as I tried to figure out the logic of this assembly. Then I was annoyed with the editing and an apparent lack of an editor, coupled with worries about how readers would engage this work. Then my annoyance turned to irritation, and in the process of plumbing my irritation, I became interested in exploring the stakes of this kind of document – a curated (not edited) “exhibition” of primary and secondary sources. I remained a little irritated with but also interested in the project of *Lake Superior [etc.]* in the way someone is interested in a cake they are baking with an ingredient (they've just realized) erroneously missing. All along, as I read and reread and experienced the unfolding terrain of my thinking-feeling, I was steeped in my love for Niedecker, and my belief in small presses as sites of innovation – the small press was, after all, a lifeblood for Niedecker in her lifetime, and a site of turmoil and reparation to her reputation after her death. Notably, the debate about Niedecker's status shifted away from the small press when it was taken up in academic contexts around the turn of the century. So that this edition marks an opportunity to return to debate (I will explain why), is another notable development.



I'm heartened by Lorine Niedecker's humble admission to Cid Corman: "I'm very slow, anyhow, you know." I'm very slow too, and Niedecker's life and work helps frame that as a virtue in terms of producing powerful, exacting poems ("tenacious, sinewy, not merely gem-like," according to Beverly Dahlen), while living a purposeful, quiet life ("I think lines of poetry that I might use-- / all day long and even in the night"). But her life and work, as they have become more and more visible due to works of scholarship, also frame slowness as a liability in terms of being understood by literary history. *Lake Superior [etc.]* showcases the virtues *and* the liabilities. I want to praise its producers for the former, and reprimand them for the latter. *Lake Superior [etc.]* is doing something very valuable for a contemporary reading of Niedecker but it casts up regrettable obstacles to (somewhat like shadows over) understanding Niedecker at the same time.

Perhaps the most adventitious service of this edition is to foreground a literary-geographical landscape by gathering writings about, from, and through places particular to Niedecker to create a multifaceted context that enables a slow reading and nuanced view of "Lake Superior" – her spare five-page poem delving into the geology and human history of the region around the Great lake. She enters place not as a tourist but as leading her own tour, geology guidebook in hand, on a road trip "to the spatial," as she called it, and, following a trajectory of thought out of Objectivism, she lets facts speak for themselves. The texts assembled in *Lake Superior [etc.]* speak along with some of those. Her writing of this short poem was very slow and deeply-considered, and now our reading of it may be, too. In several letters and in the notebook Niedecker kept while researching the poem, she complains about the speed at which she was experiencing the landscape. In the fall of 1966 she wouldn't have blamed car culture per se, though cars proved to be too numerous and too fast: "And you're whizzing along the highway with a glimpse of beach but there's traffic behind and you simply continue to whiz." Niedecker documents the history of the area's geological features while revealing layers of human endeavor (early explorers' and her own) that bear witness to slowly-developing but



ultimately large-scale alterations. In light of the accumulating data on the catastrophic effects of climate change, “Lake Superior” is prescient in its deceleration of knowing. Niedecker turns to words and rock because she wants to take in the long, diachronic view, to remove the glaze of velocity from the passing scenery out the car window. *Lake Superior [etc.]* helps us grasp her ambitious project. Whether we read the book from beginning to end (Niedecker’s poem, followed by her “Lake Superior Country” journal, followed by a critical essay, correspondence, and various other nonfiction works, including her WPA contribution to a Wisconsin travel guide) or wander around in the texts accompanying the poem (including an essay by Aldo Leopold and the travel journals of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Pierre Esprit Radisson), we gain a sense of the complexity of her journey and her way of inhabiting the region.

Significantly, this book is, on the face of it, anonymously curated and not “edited.” As David Wojahn notes in his review of *Lake Superior [etc.]*, “It’s a most engaging volume, almost *sui generis*.” It’s as though Niedecker had assembled this enhanced version of “Lake Superior” herself or, even less likely, as though Niedecker had left a cache of texts in the papers she left behind. “Lake Superior Country” is one of very few notebooks to survive; a special status of which *Lake Superior [etc.]* curiously makes no mention. Though it’s common knowledge that the volume is edited by Wave Press editor Joshua Beckman (he is credited as being the editor on most reselling websites, but not on Wave’s own; the pronoun “we” occurs in the book’s acknowledgements, and the Library of Congress cataloguing information credits Niedecker as sole author), the book bears little sign of being edited. We are delivered the facts themselves – Niedecker’s poem and a variety of related texts. Lacking the paratexts that inevitably crop up from the work of editing – introduction, footnotes, index, contributor biographies – the reader has many questions to answer for theirself. Ultimately, the selection of texts is more suggestive than directive; one is left to make their own route through the ersatz assemblage. Perhaps this captures the spirit of the poem and its precursor explorers, but that “ersatz” phrase makes me sad because I



am of two minds. This is a small press poetry book, the small press poetry world is a small world, and this book will have a limited audience, and many of those will be in the know. Wave Books has branded itself with a minimalist design aesthetic that here seems to say “this is a book for poets.” Perhaps the minimalist editing strategy is meant to align with that. At the same time, it’s hard to avoid the sense that this is a substitute for a “proper” in-depth treatment that the poem deserves. But I’m also resistant to the authority of the singular model of the “critical edition,” which while it enables a reader to make multiple connections, by nature limits these to an academic field of inquiry. I want this book to find readers who will strike out on their own discoveries; but I’m also wary of the misunderstandings that might result. Probably, I worry the issue too much. If *Lake Superior [etc.]* is a gift to the reading public, then I’m just poo-pooing the party. Many will be glad that Wave Books took on this project, and the reviews thus far have been glowing. But why end the discussion short of critical thoughts about this noncritical edition? A few reviewers suggest compelling uses for this book. I detail these below. But first, let’s dive into it – the atmosphere that *Lake Superior [etc.]* as it stands establishes for a slow reading of “Lake Superior.” And then explore the consequences of this curatorial model.

For readers new to Niedecker, their reading will be slowed by the process of answering questions that might arise: Who was/is Lorine Niedecker, Aldo Leopold, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Douglas Crace (whose critical essay “Niedecker and the Evolutionary Sublime” is the sole metatextual gesture in this collection)? An introduction could have cleared up confusions about texts included and their authors, and the geography of the poem. Lacking this, *Lake Superior [etc.]* unnecessarily obscures the relation between the various texts. Niedecker becomes a ghost haunting her own poem. Maybe her *Art* is a house that tries to be haunted. But we’d like to live in that house, too. The more-than-casual reader, the one with some knowledge of Niedecker, will find they can only dig so far, despite the tools the book provides. Their reading will be slowed by different questions that the edition will not answer: why is Crace referencing Harold Bloom? When was



his article written? The book replicates pages from Niedecker's handwritten and typed notes; where can I find these images? What other objects are in the digital archive not reproduced or mentioned here? The scholar of Niedecker may find this volume intriguing; they may find that it deepens their sense of Niedecker and allows them to pass some new threads through their own texts. They may wonder why there is only one critical essay, and may wonder about the absence of Jenny Penberthy, who has been a major force in shaping (at some junctures rescuing) Niedecker's reception in the years that such work was shifting from small press to academic settings. (The editors thank Jenny Pennberthy in the book's frontmatter, citing her edited work, *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, as an "inspiration," but is that sort of like calling her out as muse?) They may be pleased that this volume brings attention back to Niedecker, if attention has waned since the publication of *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works* over a decade ago and *Radical Vernacular*, which gathers essays from participants in the 2003 Lorine Niedecker Centenary Celebration (upwards of a dozen scholarly articles continue to be published each year). The burning question – *who edited this book?* – probably won't cross the minds of the neophyte; it might irritate the more-than-casual reader; it won't be an issue for Niedecker scholars and those otherwise in-the-know.

Full disclosure: I fall into the second category of reader, approaching the third aspirationally. More disclosure: I'm having trouble being suitably prickly about this book for all its potential shortcomings because 1) I like it a lot as a material source-book; 2) this edition is doing something new and interesting; and 3) I don't like not knowing whose work I'm critiquing. That aporia at which I am pointing my finger irritates me. It's not just because I want to know who put these texts together and why – that I want the *essaying* that is at the heart of an editing project – but I get the sense that I'm not *supposed* to question the authority of this volume. Thus there's good reason to entertain the question of this essay: What's at stake here, in the mode of such a volume in general, and in Niedecker's case in particular, and why? And what's the significance of this model appearing now?



The nearest I can come to making sense of the lack of editorial attribution here is that the work aspires to align with the vernacular as something like a poet-scholar's book, a work of studious inquiry that forfeits academic publishing conventions (and some of the legitimacies these confer) to proceed, with a freer sense of style, along the contours of flexible, connective thinking. That is, to foreground the process of *essaying* in a non-traditionalized traditional sense: to write in pursuit of knowing. Precedents for this kind of project exist in Olson's Mayan letters (and other published correspondence), the historical poetics William Carlos Williams and Susan Howe, the feminist poetics of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and texts of poets' "talks," to name a few. Not singularly "authored," *Lake Superior [etc.]* is not like those. And it otherwise does not resonate with an ongoing literary-critical mode. That it breaks with modes is interesting. If it is an avant-garde work, we should be able to determine what it is reacting against, what is it hoping to achieve.

*Lake Superior [etc.]* is a curated work, and there are several ways to think about that, but the closest analogue is digital content curation. Gathering relevant information on a single topic, *Lake Superior [etc.]* is a work of "aggregation," of which we can distinguish between three modes: vernacular or popular (pinterest, tumblr, etc.), business communication and marketing-based, and pedagogical. Is the corporate branding model the best way to make sense of this book? Or is it more apt to think of it as a textbook? More likely, a hybrid of these, as Wave is attempting both to brand itself (with a minimalist aesthetic to which Niedecker's poetry adheres) *and* situate itself as a source of teaching texts. This is a smart thing for a small press to do. Poetry books should be read in classrooms. Small Press Distribution publishes syllabi and suggested reading lists and offers discounts to help make this happen. As a pedagogically-gearred aggregation of texts, it has its limitations for which I again cite the lack of editor-derived paratexts. It doesn't follow, for example, "key rules" for pedagogical curation offered by educators at The Garrison Forest School, such as "Make sure that there is a human hand in your process, solely automated curation is flat" and "A mix of original content and curated content is better than 100% curated



in most cases.” This would make it suitable for an advanced undergraduate classroom, though Wave Books perhaps has the graduate student in creative or literary studies market in mind.

Of all the reviews I read, two make assessments that suggest how this book might be put to use in the classroom. Voicing the craft-oriented poet’s perspective, David Wojahn sees the volume as “a kind of [eccentric] primer on the process of imaginative composition,” detailing how one poet “combines learning with mental collage-making, serendipity, immense seriousness of purpose, happy accidents along with unhappy dead-ends, flashes of insight, and a willingness to fashion from the quotidian a haunted but enduring knowledge.” From the perspective of environmental humanities, ecocritic Heather Houser stresses the way the compilation, “without being didactic or alarmist,” addresses a particular environmental consciousness, and more specifically, “promotes Niedecker as a spokesperson for this consciousness” – one attuned to located “historical and linguistic contingencies.” Thus, the past and present might be held together to encourage thinking about how to approach “a threatened future” in a way that only the humanities can grasp, so that we can treat climate change, mass extinction, and other crises “as social, cultural, and experiential challenges and not just problems for quantitative scientists and engineers.” I find this analysis interesting because it shifts the focus from a “literary” reading of Niedecker *as* environmentally-engaged poet to a pedagogical reading whereby the volume might “invite us to recognize poetry as a tool for environmental thought.” If this book were produced as a literary-market focused critical edition, Houser’s interpretation of it might not have evolved. If this volume did make its way into environmental studies classrooms, it might open up the door to consideration of more innovative, deanthropocentrizing (or, at least, less “I”-centered and normatively narrative) texts as alternatives ways of apprehending knowledge about changing environments in the Anthropocene. In that context, students might overlook problems set in motion by the charmingly clunky subtitle, though parsing it is a critical exercise worthy of a seminar on literary editing. Debates might unfold:



“Journal” accurately describes her “Lake Superior Country,” but are her typed notes a “source” or a “document”? Does “sources” refer to Niedecker’s sources, or sources that inform our reading of the poem? “Readings” seems to refer to the very different kinds of texts that we may read to accompany our reading of the poem, like Crace’s literary critical essay, or Leopold’s “On a Monument to the Pigeon.” Simple enough. Related to thinking about the subtitle, there’s the matter of the contents they signify. If Schoolcraft and Pierre Esprit Radisson are “sources” (for Niedecker) or “documents” (for us), why these particular pages? How well do they represent the *oeuvre* (which surely Niedecker read around in) and how are they seen to create a context for understanding the poem? And I wonder how this book would be taken up in a class on women’s literature, for the literary critical project of seeing Niedecker as a poet is inseparable from the project that unfolded in the 1980s and 1990s of attuning critical attention to gender, ideology, and literary history. And this is a task this volume does not prepare them for.

The verb *to curate* gestures etymologically towards the role of a *curator*, commonly “someone who’s in charge.” A curate in this sense is a figure whose authority is endowed by a patriarchal institution. Instruction is a primary tool of a curate, and this aspect is reflected in most examples of digital curating whether vernacular, corporate, or pedagogical: all to some extent participate in the management/repackaging of social media content, and the authority to do so is assumed; the product is itself evidence of the agent’s authority. But with *to edit* the tables are turned; etymologically, the action is emphasized; only in the act of editing is one an editor. To put it another way, curating is self-reflective and editing is self-reflexive. “Curatorial decisions” include determining what’s left in, what’s left out, and how objects for larger consideration are framed in an exhibit; it does not necessarily include justifications for decisions. In other words, a curated work doesn’t make transparent the fact of its own contrivance. With “editorial decisions,” because the agent is defined by the process, decisions in the presentation of an object for larger consideration are made transparent. This is not solely due to academic mandate; the work as a



whole is considered an argument. In the case of *Lake Superior [etc.]*, the missing factual information any reader can provide for themselves, but the lack of transparency in the decisions about what this volume includes and excludes – that’s another matter.

And there’s the rub. That’s why there’s something at stake. It is the enterprise of literary scholarship to argue about representations of individuals within evolving critical understandings of contexts. Literary history is, in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ words, “the account of what is there, what is ‘on the ground,’ who is writing, what, and possibly why; who is responding, what discursive practices and social meanings are created.” A poet is plastic, a figure reshaped by our very grasps, and this shaping is a collective endeavor to which (and through which) many individuals are attached. A figure about which (or rather whom) we argue. About which or whom we argue because there is something at stake, which in this case is (and is not limited to) a history of feminist scholarship. One might argue that *Lake Superior [etc.]* is not a work of literary scholarship; fair enough. But at the same time an understanding of where this edition enters into literary history should be articulated. At least that’s my preference. Editors stake a claim on their relationship to the materials at hand. The curatorial model of textual management keeps implicit what the editorial model makes explicit, but a relationship does exist in the curatorial model. What is the relationship in the case of *Lake Superior [etc.]*? In a *New York Times* Poetry Profile of Wave Books editors Beckman and Matthew Zapruder list *Lake Superior [etc.]* amongst those they are most proud to have published, explaining it is one book “that might not ordinarily get published because of [its] unusual genres or general lack of marketability.[...] The importance and quality of the content always comes first and drives our efforts.” It *is* a work that sketches out an “unusual genre,” but not only in the way they mean.

Paco Barragán, a Madrid-based art curator, identifies two curatorial models. In one, the curator’s *concept* determines the content and form of the exhibition, a concept “the curator wants to explore as part of the way she



or he understands the world's narratives." The other is guided by "the artist's works, processes and discourses," which "prefigure[] and configure[] the curator's concept" such that the making of meaning relies on the artist's work. Barragán further proposes that curating is a metanarrative "as it embodies a narrative about narrative dealing with the nature, structure and signification of curatorial narratives." In the case of the curating of *Lake Superior [etc.]*, we might substitute the "signification of editorial or scholarly narratives," for it seems to me that the volume itself has to be understood as an articulation of an understanding of literary history, and that in a certain slant of light it appears to be more aligned with the first curatorial model. This may take some convincing, because *Lake Superior [etc.]* appears to be (*sui generis*) a collection of texts derived from "the artist's works, processes and discourses" – and in part, it is. And probably this is the reading of this volume that is intended. Barragán's elaboration is enlightening: "Every curator selects and orders artworks, and her or his perspective adds to the subjectivity of the narrative. And, as such, the curatorial constructs a text that refers to the generation and accumulation of meaning across texts. We could say that an exhibition is basically a text that constructs the meaning of the past in the context of the present." Taking *Lake Superior [etc.]* as an "exhibition," what's missing is the "accumulation of meaning" across text affiliated with Niedecker's oeuvre, such that the "past" (Niedecker's biographical past, as well as the history of literary scholarship that pertains to our understanding of it) is emptied of meaning, and the present of Niedecker studies is nowhere to be seen.

This brings me back to the question that niggled at me during my first read-through: *who edited this?* Which brings me back to the atmosphere that is established for an understanding of Niedecker in *Lake Superior [etc.]*. Lacking other options, I had assumed that Crace was the editor (why unattributed, I didn't know) and this assumption of authority became part of my atmosphere for reading the poem. Crace's broad and detailed essay creates an evolutionary literary context for reading "Lake Superior"; it is, according to Penberthy, "a marvelous essay that probes [Niedecker's]



motivations, style, sources, and methods.” This is how she praised it in her introduction to *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* (1996) in which his essay appeared. Crace puts Niedecker’s poem in a tradition he calls the “evolutional sublime” with its earmark “passionate deference to the organic and inorganic commonwealth that cannot otherwise speak for itself.” In relation to recent ecocritical thinking about Niedecker, this resonates soundly. With this third publication, Crace’s essay has gotten much play; it was previously published in *Raritan* 12.2 (Fall 1992), which explains the outdated reference to Harold Bloom. But I wonder about reading Niedecker through the lens of an anxiety of influence. Crace attributes her motivation for writing the poem to her “unspoken designs” to subvert “her discovering predecessors” (that is, Schoolcraft, Radisson) who were “first” and thus an obstacle to her “desire for unopposed poetic immortality.” While there are hints of jealousy towards the prelapsarian condition of their explorations, it’s strange to ply immortality anxiety to such a self-effacing poet. Misplaced Freudianism is one thing, but more importantly, Crace sits Niedecker in a falsely uncomplicated position in relation to the gendered poetics of the social contexts of her era, even as (or because) it corresponds to the literary-critical politics of his. That is, Crace was not the only critic at this early juncture in the development of Niedecker criticism motivated by an argument with another male critic. A glimpse at the contents of *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet* provides a sense of this juncture. Divided into four categories – “The Life,” “The Woman,” “The Poet I” and “The Poet II” – only one of the female contributors (these are 4, out of the volume’s 19) puts in with the majority of the men (11) who focus their arguments on gender-neutral-all-things-being-equal readings of the work. The gender-inflected approaches of the other 3 women comprise, solely, “The Woman.” The more recent *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, in contrast, is comprised of essays by 6 men and 10 women, and as the gender politics of literary criticism has shifted, so have the kinds of arguments being made.

Given the evolution of Niedecker criticism, I’m wary of Wave Book’s privileging of this one critical text. First, because it *is* dated (some



contemporary readers will not get the reference to Bloom), and second, because it's the only critical text. It's true that few essays focus exclusively on this poem. Penberthy's "Writing Lake Superior" provides all of the facts, but lacks the long historical view Crace provides. If a contemporary reader of Niedecker – Elizabeth Willis, editor of *Radical Vernacular*, and Wave Book's own Lisa Fishman and Hoa Nguyen come to mind – had written an introduction to *Lake Superior [etc.]*, then the terrain the reader navigates would be significantly re-textured, their path altered, their slow reading enriched. Lacking the (time-consuming) acquisition of a new introduction, I get *why* Crace's essay is included. But the reader is asked to put all their faith into Crace's reading of Niedecker because his is the only critical voice. And that would be fine, if it were explained why they should. Why this frame has been selected – what the curatorial concept is, or the literary argument. It's maddening to see a self-effacing female poet submersed in Bloom's sense of literary patrilineage when so much retrieval work has been done. In this light, the unspoken in Crace's essay not only turns back the clock, so to speak; it also suggests an edging away from a responsibility that Penberthy and many critics following take full on: to see the poet not in an abstract lineage ("of influence"), but in a complicated social field, amidst the materials and relations of her lived moment – which is possible because we can think past that moment, as a reader of Niedecker in the present.

When, at the hands of feminist scholars, Niedecker began to emerge from her male-centered social context (that is, primarily her relationship to Zukofsky, for whom she effaced herself), we were also revising our contemporary literary contexts. The retrieval of an experimental female predecessor such as Niedecker from obscurity had (and has) implications for poetry's future. Niedecker's renown has grown – to the point where publishing this volume makes sense – *because* of the dedication of female poets and editors dating back to the late 1980s. If, in the case of Niedecker, we are post-argument, then we are also post-gender, or at least we are ready to acknowledge that feminist scholarship is not relevant in an understanding of "Lake Superior."



As I continue to move through the worry-annoyance-irritation of reading this book, I begin to resent the *sense* of authority that *Lake Superior [etc.]* conveys *even as it, as a curated work, downplays that authority*. I calm myself, reminding myself that this is probably an unanticipated side effect on the curator's part. My emotions are unanticipated, but so is this: that *Lake Superior [etc.]* says something about the relative value of innovative women poets "as a product" (if we must) – in the sense that no arguments are anticipated, in the sense that no argument is being made. The hand's-off curatorial intent risks being misread. Or begs to be misread. In the sense that someone begs for a fight. Unless there really is no argument there. But of course that cannot be the case. We may wish to see Lorine as the lone bookish poet at her labors on the lakeshore – as in her much reproduced photograph – but examine evidence from the literary field, and a more complicated image emerges.

Niedecker was chosen as the figurehead of the innovative lineage traced in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Women Poets* (Talisman House, 1998) – which makes her a sort of Charles Olson, if this volume is likened to *The New American Poetry*. There will never be a *The Maximus Poems [etc.]* in the same way there is this edition of "Lake Superior" because men have already staked their careers on his oeuvre. That sounds catty, but I'll stand by that. Setting the inseparable matters of scope and influence aside – no one would claim that Niedecker's oeuvre could measure up to Olson's, or that her short "long poem" could spin out an industry in the way "The Maximus Poems" has. Actually, that's something I wouldn't mind seeing happen. And it's likely that this volume could play a role in that. Which leads me to wondering; what's the end game here? What is at stake for Wave in editing this volume? In June 2013, Penberthy lamented that at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Niedecker's works are archivally subsumed under Zukofsky's collection: "Look up Niedecker in the HRHRC catalogue," Penberthy pointed out, "and there's no sign of her: a cataloguing error waiting to be addressed." In other words, editors have power based in argument. As of this writing, this visibility issue has been addressed. Search



results for “Niedecker” in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center catalogue direct one to manuscripts and letters, either written or edited by Niedecker, in the Zukofsky Collection. (I’ve already offered some answers to this question, but) what, in the case of *Lake Superior [etc.]*, is hoped to be achieved?

Given the cultural context and the history of literary scholarship, there is something at stake, but it is being ignored. This problem (*my* problem) could have been avoided with a different selection of texts and paratexts and if the volume acknowledged what is, to this date, known (and argued) about Niedecker. My skepticism would be dulled. An appendix or list of sources or additional sources might serve as a release valve. And more importantly, problems for newer readers would be avoided. They’d have a sense of Niedecker’s reception, and a next step to take. Which leads me to the part where I wonder about the assumptions readers will make as they attempt to read connectively between the texts presented in *Lake Superior [etc.]*. Here’s where some editorial direction would be propitious. The inclusion of texts related to *Origin* editor Corman is a case in point. The three letters she wrote to him in the summer months as she was planning to take her road trip provide insight into their friendship and her process and contribute to the atmosphere (and usefully slow a reading) of the poem. We don’t see his side of the correspondence because Niedecker destroyed it, and that’s something *Lake Superior [etc.]* won’t tell you. I have my doubts, however, about the inclusion of a short excerpt from Corman’s translation of Matsuo Bashō’s *Back Roads to Far Towns (Oku-no-hosomichi)*. I can’t be sure (as I mentioned earlier, I’m only aspirational Niedecker scholar), but I’m almost certain that while Niedecker most certainly read this poem, it isn’t part of what I am calling the atmosphere of her writing of “Lake Superior.” She devoured every issue of *Origin* and valued Corman’s translation of Bashō’s poetry and prose travel journal (published in total in a single issue of *Origin* in July 1964) – so much so that she “couldn’t bear to send [the issue with Bashō] at all” to Brown University, then acquiring materials related to Zukofsky, as she wrote to Corman. This was in 1964, 2 years



before she began the poem. In moving between “Lake Superior” and *Back Roads*, it’s a stretch to assume that the latter influenced the former directly (and, tellingly, scholars have been silent on this point), for while Niedecker makes references to Bashō in a few short poems written during this period, a letter to Corman written a few months after finishing “Lake Superior” indicates that *Back Roads to Far Towns* wasn’t at the forefront of her mind; she inquired of Corman whether “Your *Basho* [...] has not some of it appeared in an *Origin* of two or more years ago?” She “prized what I saw,” she notes. Had she sent those issues to Brown? Corman’s edition of *Back Roads to Far Towns* would be published two years later (1968). Niedecker’s “Bosho” pun in a letter to Corman (included in *Lake Superior [etc.]*) is well known, and it’s possible to read multiple connections through it (it’s a very complicated pun, taking swipes at Longfellow along the way). How, then, might readers connect these texts? Anne Waldman considers this very situation in addressing some of Niedecker’s short poems and puts it this way: “not wanting to presume too much of a stretch [...] toward Eastern modes, structures, and praxes (a personal bias), I would like to position/ imagine Niedecker as a poet with *that kind of mind* and refer to the poems as influenced directly by Japanese haiku, and her naturally meditative mind.” This is the kind of circumspection an editor could admit. For *Back Roads* is not a “source” in the same way that Radisson’s and Schoolcraft’s travel journals are. It’s a “reading” perhaps, a companion text that also treats geography and history in an on-the-ground way. There is more to be said in making the argument either way, but suffice it to say that in refusing to take a stance on whether *Back Roads* is a “source” or a “reading,” *Lake Superior [etc.]* keeps the book, so to speak, open, but also contributes to possible misunderstandings. On her own editing of Niedecker’s manuscripts for *Lorine Niedecker: Collected Works*, Penberthy clarifies that her goal was to produce “both a reader’s edition and a scholarly edition” by presenting poems, plays and prose “uncluttered with apparatus” for the reader, and for the “intrepid scholar,” the addition of “a dense 100-page section of notes.” An editor doesn’t tell you how to read a book but, with a particular audience in mind, makes conscious decisions about how a book may be read. I’m not



arguing for the exclusion of the Bashō text, but I would want the volume to include a few words about why it is included.

I really want to love this book, but it seems to me that its value is undercut by a few, in some cases minor, oversights that arise from the non-academic editing through which it becomes something of an “un-editing” of Niedecker, a stripping away of accumulated knowledge. I’d prefer that the text of the poem were not so enclosed in this edition; that, for example, it include the urls where one can consult Penberthy’s “Writing Lake Superior” and see all of Niedecker’s notes and digital images of “Lake Superior Country” (with postcards Niedecker collected, it is more of a scrapbook than is let on in the transcription here). I’d prefer a preface or postface or footnotes that would give readers more direct access to primary materials and the thinking (and the personality, and the person) that brought them together here. Someone selected the passages from Radisson and Schoolcraft; someone decided what to exclude. I’d prefer to know that Niedecker’s “Lake Superior Country” notebook was first published in *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, and I would like to see mention of the fact that “The notes have survived in a box of assorted papers and photographs which escaped Al Millen’s notice when he carried out Niedecker’s instruction to destroy all her papers after her death” as Penberthy clarifies in a footnote. This fact goes unmentioned in this edition, an egregious omission if the point of this volume is to bring the reader closer to Niedecker’s thoughts or process. The anecdote about the overlooked box gives us a sense of Niedecker’s personality and her poetics – her desire that, as Zukofsky put it in the epigraph to his *Autobiography*, “The works says all there needs to be said of one’s life” (Said the poet who now has an archive devoted to his work). Ironically, Niedecker might have preferred to have her work read as it is presented in *Lake Superior [etc.]* (minus her journals and notes). Knowing this, we may read the poem and at same time wonder why she wanted the trail of the journey destroyed, and realize how lost we would be as we feel grateful for Millen’s oversight. We can further slow our reading of “Lake Superior,” dig more deeply.



“Strange – ,” Niedecker notes in a letter to Corman, “we are always inhabiting more than one realm of existence – but they all fit in if the art is right.” Perhaps the Wave editors envision this volume as fitting with the already-detailed discourse on Niedecker. Perhaps the art *is* right. Some (many? most?) will overlook the omissions and appreciate how this edition presents the texts with manifold referentiality intact. The poem betokens the kind of openness curating can instigate. At its best, *Lake Superior [etc.]* let’s Niedecker’s ambition and humility speak for itself (except where Crace would speak for her). We need a context in which to be curious about it, because it’s rare and valuable, and that helps us help each other in the ways of our curiosity. In the best of circumstances, the results will be fruitful.

The appearance of *Lake Superior: Lorine Niedecker’s Poem and Journal, Along with Other Sources, Documents, and Readings* is exciting because it sets out boldly in the vein of vernacular scholarship that sets aside the restraint of convention and protocols for a demonstration of expertise. As demonstrated by the *Lost & Found: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative* – which publishes an “exhibit” of four individually-edited chapbooks each year – there is a place for this working of the literary ecotone. If *Lake Superior [etc.]* lacks critical objectives and an awareness of critical contexts befitting a “critical edition,” it is suggestive and connective, and enables forays in multiple directions – including the sort of cross-disciplinary thinking Houser advocates. It led me to thinking more deeply about Niedecker, Corman, and Bashō. *Lake Superior [etc.]* raises the question of the value of (anonymously) curated editions, and how and whether this vernacular mode can be in conversation with more rigorous academic works and their histories, or with thinking that might emerge in the classrooms and other sites in which it is read. *Lake Superior [etc.]* suggests that the opportunity is there to create a dialectical situation “so that one doesn’t [sic] read too rapidly” – as Cid Corman wrote, in his translator’s preface, of his marginal glossary notations *Oku-no-hosomichi*, originally published in *Origin*. (Corman’s notations, or any sign that they exist, are not included in *Lake Superior [etc.]*).



## Sources:

Barragán, Paco. "Push to Flush: Curating as Metanarrative (On the Metatextual Nature of Curating)." *artpulsemagazine.com*.

Dahlen, Beverly. "Notes on Reading Lorine Niedecker." *HOW(ever)* Vol. 1, No. 1 (May, 1983)

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Class, Genre and Resistances." *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 96-116. Since reprinted in *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*. (Cambridge UP, 2001).

Faranda, Lisa Pater, ed. *Between Your House and Mine: The Letters of Lorine Niedecker to Cid Corman, 1960-1970*. (Duke University Press, 1986).

The Garrison Forest School. "Curating Texts" Google site.

Houser, Heather. "Geologic Time from Now On!": Lorine Niedecker's Lake Superior." *lareviewofbooks.org*.

Jennings, Dana. "Poetry Profiles: Wave Books." *New York Times* May16, 2014.

Penberthy, Jenny. "Editing Niedecker." *How2* (vol. 1, no. 7), 2002. online.

-----, "The very variants: A few revisions to Lorine Niedecker's 'Collected Works.'" *Jacket2.org*. June 24, 2013.

-----, ed. *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*. (National Poetry Foundation, 1996)

Sloan, Mary Margaret. *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Women Poets*. Talisman House Books, 1998.

Waldman, Anne. "Who is Sounding? Awakened View, Gaps, Silence, Cage, Niedecker" in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Univeristy of Iowa Press, 2008)

Wojahn, David. "A Pocket Epic & The Hermit Poet: A Review of Robert Lax's Poems 1962-1997 & Lorine Niedecker's Lake Superior." *numerocinqmagazine.com*



## Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

*Hello, the Roses*

New Directions, 2015

REVIEWED BY JAMES SHERRY

Many wonderful poets have written about nature describing its beauties and relations to humanity. Now with the threat of climate change our culture about nature must change. But very few poets have dared to propose new views of nature: it either frees us from the bonds of civilization, revealing inner truth (Thoreau and eco-poetics) or it must be tamed to improve our lives, ignoring the world to explore our minds (modernists). Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *Hello, the Roses* proposes a new way to look at the relationship between humanity and nature, breaking a path with method.

*Hello, the Roses* breaks / reenergizes communication. In the title poem, Mei-mei walks into a room and sees a plant and the plant sees her. "The rose communicates instantly with the woman by sight, collapsing its boundaries, and the woman widens her boundaries." Aside from the punctuation, this long line materializes the connection creating a third component between the woman and the rose. Communication is not taken for granted and sits side by side with the flowing metric. Communication defined by the poem instead of just being in the poem permits us to accept the plant as a correspondent.

OK, the plant "sees" in its way, not the woman's way, but the woman "radially whorls out to the edges" to accommodate the rose. Accepting that she can use communication outside the realm of human language may be difficult for you. But the connection appears in both feminist and environmental spaces through her spiraling, overflowing the edges of what we are willing to admit into our worldview. At the large scale the spiral whorl of the biosphere, and it's in the detail of the rose as well. And even though it's poetry, Mei-mei



makes it so matter of fact that I don't reject it as a real world paradigm. In the poem "Winter Whites," section 1 brings memory (method), too, into a society where humanity and the non-human parts of the biosphere merge. In "Winter Whites" "memory widens its focus" extending her mind into the environment, because "...memory doesn't end where my skin ends, but diffuses into my surroundings, / leaving fragments of itself that I may notice."

In section 2, she looks "into the sky and so backward in time." There, organisms merge with their surroundings. "There, a butterfly is a live portion of earth flying, deer a portion of its leafy surface." (She might have said as she does in an email, "leaping surface.") The terms of humanist engagement with our world have not heretofore encouraged this integration or interpenetration of things we perceive as separate. Identifying and validating the position of humanity either as fragments of god's mind or as a defined and dominant species would not permit such a demotion in the hierarchy of either *Genesis* or *Gita*.

Redefining thought as an entity that works with a brain *and* its perceptual linkages to the outside means you have an identity, yes, but it's not separated by such firm boundaries. It's integrated with its surroundings in many of its processes. "That's why environment can't be identified by a consciousness that's coextensive with it." In that consciousness observing and experience are entities together, materialized both by our awareness and her writing because "more and more experience becomes a contingent particle."

"Recognizing and observing combine into a relation or inference" in Mei-mei's world. I contend this model is more factual, more how we feel about things (when we're not defending a position) than the body / spirit dichotomy of so much other poetry. And the new archetype doesn't stop with the integration of things but extends to the materialization of connections.



“Then I look for the invisible wires of this passage.” This line plays with many illusions from the magician who is suddenly exposed as a trickster (shades of Burroughs) to the hard-wired connections between things like the deer and her leaves or the person in her room. The most interesting connection that is materialized for me in this poem, however, is the passage from image to person (shades of Saussure’s signage). This is where poetry has the most to add to an environmental culture that might allow us to make changes in our lives without repeating the same mistakes with new technology (innovation) or new political systems (revolution).

Very few poets have been willing to materialize these connections so matter of factly. The spirit keeps intruding in modernism. For Mei-mei spirit is just another entity occupying space in the image extending out to the identities we build for ourselves. Ideas are things as much as WCW’s “in things.” The transformations of indeterminacy (Heisenberg), the “glimpse of a gaze” (Bernstein), the calculations of the biome (Turing), and the citizen-legislator (Rousseau) all emerge as chimerical bodies of Mei-mei’s solar systems. And this queer formulation extends beyond our personal identities that are so vital to arresting climate change. Because if we don’t allow ourselves to be more than the mere consumers we have become, how can a new world function, since climate change itself can’t be consumed?

This materiality extends in section 3: “Between any experiences, memories, objects are silent rhythms and intervals.” Where “transparency *is* landscape”, we are permitted to return to ourselves, breathing “sunlight, night, despair and gems or solitude, reef, star dissolving into names make eventless the poet’s experience.” Mei-mei breaks down the “dialectic of self-other... percepts threading back and forth as if through live wires in air.” In my and apparently her world these are actual live wires composed of the energetic solids of poetic language, poetic intent and biological diversity. “Its form represents materialized accumulated energies...”



OK, so start living in her world, just try it. At first as in section 4 components are difficult to distinguish, “A white out of wintry weather.” And even Mei-mei is surprised at this new world that has been revealed to her through decades of wrestling with herself. “I did not think feeling proceeded from anything *like* this.” “Light is forming darkness...// blankness is filled with experience...”

The integration of oneself into the world isn't only a personal venture or self-realization from focused attention. “A collective unconscious of all experience underlies events along an electron's path, because space is a psychological property.” Social responsibility bleeds into what at first appears as narcissism; Mei-mei has grown beyond the world as an extension of self, recognizing the other, an *Ubuntu* (I am because you are) of poetic expression.

And it's a practical and simple material reality. “I see light around a corner, combinations of others' memories adjacent to mine and polyvalent.” And the poem explains our situation where “fear takes the form of an argument...” How often have we wondered what are they fighting about? Oh, I get it now, thanks, Mei-mei. Can I keep this thought in mind as the pressures of change build around me?

Events “dissipating ... along with my own borders” become temporary selves that are difficult to discern in the white out. “Different species communicate and energies of environment and inhabitants merge.” The poet and poetry communicate to the reader and surrounds. “My memory travels into the memory of another...”

I want to caution as I close that the world she has created seethes with danger for each of us, yet changing ourselves is far less dangerous than having our world change us the hard way. Who are you? Who might you be? Can you transform poetry from imagining to a solid connection composed of actual things that change shape with events? In a world where



our poetry so often and so desperately tries to separate the poet to validate her existence, an existence by and large denied by the legal, quantifiable movement of capital, Mei-mei shows us how easy it is to think of those dearly held spirituals as “wires of this passage.” These wires extend thinking beyond the mind, making the world as much a repository of value as our thoughts. They also stretch into the next world where we develop agency by thinking and observing.



**Syd Staiti**

*The Undying Present*

Krupskaya, 2015

REVIEWED BY LAURA MORIARTY

“They are unmaking reality into a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as their desires become words.” (57)

*The Undying Present* could be described as a nonlinear poetic novel with filmic aspects. It is an allegory in the most complex sense of that term where a vexed connection between not-quite imaginable elements is infused with a kind of hyper significance that reveals, startles, hides, confuses and clarifies by turns. There is, further, a poignant accuracy to the book that allows a reader to experience something like truth in a way that is artful, detailed and yet abstract. Line after line offers plain statements of the nature of the present, both of the act of writing and of the life we are in, that will be familiar to some readers and revelatory to others. *The Undying Present* is, finally, a portrait of the artist as young person of non-specific gender, not exactly autobiographical except as a sort of spiritual autobiography of a materialist revolutionary. It includes doubt.

“We prepare to enter the City of Margins. I disappear behind a curtain. The camera rolls.” (23)

Staiti’s language in this book is deft and nuanced. The examination of emotion that often advances the narrative has to do with love, thought, and politics in the form of evaluations of the situation in relation to one’s position, the other people in it and to what might be called goals and illusions:



"I walk over to the long table and sit at the end of it . . . Key members make their theories known so that marginal members can re-adjust their impressions in order to preserve a cohesive account. Members reconfirm the solidity of the group by repeating fragments of the discussion later to those who couldn't be there. I sit at the edge of the table playing the role of a marginal, as I joined the gathering too late to catch up on what has been discussed and so am unable to contribute my own key thoughts to the record." (30)

"[K]ey thoughts" are presented in the form of facts, details, actions and ideas in this constellative allegory made up of "the City of Margins," "the Second City," "the informant," "the spy," "the projectionist," "the elegant woman," "the streets," "the bedroom," and many other locations, characters, and concepts ("destiny," "the undying present" itself) in a way that is likely to confirm your perception of the present if you feel yourself to be in it with the narrator and informs you about that realm if you do not. That is to say the work is about a revolutionary time. It is written in relation to a community of fellow catastrophists who, to some degree, share Staiti's sense of the present emergency. Others are invited to consider the evidence. Things happen in quoted passages at the end of the book having to do with fire. "*Only you and me then amid the pointing and the horror walled by the clean flame.*" The undying present of ordinary life continues. The text enables engagement with all of its possibilities.

"Eventually I find my home. The others are already living there, experimenting, documenting, collecting. We sit in the living room or in the kitchen or we walk up and down the stairs. We roam day and night. We slide along timelines and along the threads that connect the city with the other places we go." (129)



***Towards. Some. Air.***

eds. Amy De'Ath & Fred Wah  
Banff Centre Press, 2015

REVIEWED BY NICH MALONE

*Towards. Some. Air.*, edited by Fred Wah and Amy De'Ath, concerns itself with the space of the writer as much as the space of the poem—looking at where these spaces interact, inform, and embody each other within poetic practice. As expected, the scope of the project is expansive, moving within concerns of embodiment, colonialism, political possibility, collective subjectivity, form, and discourse. Nevertheless, the anthology holds together with an ascension of *here*, “crossing generational, geographical, and theoretical borders,” a turn not to or away from aesthetics or non-aesthetics but lingerings of interconnection, of meditation—or, the breath that surrounds meditation, encapsulating it in action, in being. To quote Peter Jaeger from the contextual introduction:

This anthology is not about legitimating a certain poetic stance or being prescriptive, but about considering the results of a particular set of developments in Anglo-American poetic practice, especially as they are placed in proximal relation to each other.

In this way, *Towards. Some. Air.* resists what I’ve come to expect from anthologies—prewritten, marketable, self-contained essays written by Wikipedia-able influentials under some shared asocial dream of occupying as many academic syllabi as possible. But, maybe resists isn’t the correct word. It is, after all, extremely open about the fact that it is an anthology—much of the foreword and contextual essay focus on the limitations inherent in the anthology form, and not just in that “please don’t hit me” sort of way, but in the way that is aware of the ground, bookshelves, coffee tables, etc. that the 343-page, perfect-bound copywritten purviews will inevitably



occupy. The editors acknowledge that the anthology form is limited by its very existence and that they cannot operate outside of the present conditions of capitalist cultural production. This brings me to a crucial moment of the anthology, from De'Ath:

For all its differences, the work collected here is also testament to a widespread interest in the relation between poetry and social change, or between poetry and revolution, even as the latter may involve an assertion that poetry cannot do the same work as a gathering of bodies at a protest or a riot.

Anthologies, obviously, don't march through the streets, they don't work with the NLG if you're kettled by the police, they don't feed your pets, or make sure you don't get fired, or wait to pick you up from jail, or hand you a bottle of champagne liberated from the clutches of a local Smart & Final. Anthologies don't even drink champagne. During a protest or riot, an anthology's immediate significance might strictly be in how easily it can be thrown through the glass of the many structural borders within we exist.

But literature does, nonetheless, play an important—if not undeniable—roll for those engaged in social struggle. As Juliana Spahr says, “literature and all art forms have often been seen as a crucial part of decolonization movements by the people who are involved in them.” This anthology comes out during a lively conversation about literary activism and that term's potential for meaning. Spahr goes on to say that there is no longer a clear movement one can be a movement poet for and the feeling of nostalgia for “that moment when poetry has a closeness with various political things that are happening.” The closest thing to a predominant school or movement in recent years—or, maybe just the closest according to those I follow on social media—has been that of conceptualism and alt lit, which also happen to be two terms that cannot be mentioned these days without immediately thinking about misogyny or racism. Even more so, many contemporary writers seem to be cautious of or taking a step away from the overall poetry



community that surrounds the present moment as an almost suffocating climate, much as Andrea Brady describes Denise Riley's departures from poetry due to the hostilities of the experimental British poetic community.

All of this comes with the chief claim of the anthology: that "poetry still operates as a powerful and convincing critique of the social," which I find, for both better and for worse, extremely persuasive and compelling in the present moment. There seems to be a collective moving away from a poetics that regurgitates corporate consumerism and commerce into new lumps of now even less likable versions of corporate consumerism and commerce that I guess "says stuff" by somehow being detached from itself, or doubly itself, as some awe-inspired moment of hell world. Instead, there is a leaning into an incorporation of practice, ritual, existence—everything that goes into writing that isn't readily fixed into its physical representation, moments of intervention and connection—not necessarily of a given but of a potential moving towards.

This is to say, the context of this anthology isn't purely in the transaction of purchase—it isn't in the collecting of a conversation that has long since built a criteria that the reader now can look into like some sort of party favor or memento—a sort of thought as after-thought, some monument you feel the need to learn the name of. This collection doesn't lean towards a conclusion—a speaking for—but attempts to stay aligned with movement, poetry's moments of intervention, i.e. this is not an anthology of yet another border, yet another selling of terminology that is marketed to make the poetic economy feel new again, collectively alienated by a new elite, a new top charts to crowd our social media, and an always remaining slightly outside of whatever dominant inner circle's celebrity. The context of the anthology is in poetry's discourse—poetry's communication, and what lingers both on and outside of the page as a sort of timeliness. The anthology situates itself in the space of space; as De'Ath puts it in her Forward: "dialogue by proximity but also to suggest a looking-outwards; not so much towards other individual poets but towards other poetics and ways of being in the world."



The social in which this anthology dwells is the inescapable situation under late capitalism that creates a deep-rooted sense of alienation from ourselves, our communities, our loved ones, and the production process. Much of this anthology concerns itself with poetry's relation and entanglement with production. Nicole Markotić and Michael Davidson discuss how poetry has the capacity to disable production and self-reliance, calling for more collaborative forms of reading and writing. This call for collaboration isn't simply a call for reader participation but one that also concerns writer and practice. Kaia Sand adds, "reading is a social encounter, one's words taken in by another, words themselves socially made. Every time each of us uses language we set it into motion," and that "an important piece of my process is showing up, returning to the archival research reading room day after day, requesting files." A motion similar to what Eileen Myles describes as the "intervention of all the parts of our body while we write," and Spahr's description of her poetry as *under the influence* of her political involvement and not the other way around, or as a substitute for—"not the riot, but beside the riot."

Jaeger's contextual essay states "poetic activism is sometimes foregrounded in these essays through the figure of silence." When I think of silence I think of breath, I think of a situating, I think of what Markotić describes as "the body *in* language" and Rita Wong's assertion that "words need to be related to actions, relationships, life." Poetry's activism isn't in being the political pamphlet's But-Now-With-Line-Breaks edition. As Sean Boone says, "I'm interested in a poetry that wants to step outside of the poetry room" and I think that this is an important distinction from being interested in a social change that wants to step *into* the poetry room—in the sense of what is being moved towards and the preexisting borders of the room. Catherine Wagner, for example, talks about that monetization of poetic labor, especially in relation to academia. It seems almost impossible, at times, to run into a poet who hasn't had formal training at a university or who isn't in the process of entering the university or always living slightly outside of those walls. And, of course, I doubt the overall reader population of this



anthology will break trend. It is, after all, an anthology. Here is where the subtitle seems most relevant:

*Remarks on Poetics of Mad Affect Militancy Feminism Demotic Rhythms Emptying Intervention Reluctance Indigeneity Immediacy Lyric Conceptualism Common Pastoral Margins Desire Ambivalence Disability The Digital and Other Practices*

Remarks stems from the French verb *remarquer*—to note again. The action of this collection is in this reentering—this reiterating of a space that symbolizes our movement. Whereas anthology, from Greek *anthologia*, is a noun—a space already built, with the movement past—where the structural place-ness of space overpowers the motion of possibility. No commas—the body of the words and the space between them take precedence over their assumed linear correlation. Instead, the list exists as one mass amongst itself, unleashed and between. To quote, again, Wong:

Rather than seeing poetry, like ecology, become a casualty of colonial and capitalist systems that steal the earth's inheritance from future generations, I feel it is our kinship — with each other, with all beings, with the lands, waters, and air — that will help make a future-in-common where poetry lives as part of our guts and grace.

Where this collection of remarks is taking us is indeterminate. Neither the editors nor the contributors are attempting to represent a road map for success or a proper way of engaging with poetry. The anthology, rightfully, ends with CAConrad's "Preternatural Conversations," where the poetry is under the influence of the poet *in* body. Where practice is a conversation between the experiences of the writer and the experience of the page, exercising the space of where these bodies *in* bodies make connections. To end on a quote by Jeff Derksen and the concept of militant sincerity: "Sincerity, shorn of its attachments to authenticity, and unleashed from a singular subject, can be a political force between social subjects. That is, politic." The between—this is where poetry's silence resides.



## **P. Inman**

*Written: 1976-2013*

if P then Q, 2014

REVIEWED BY RYAN GATO

When assembling a volume of collected poems, how the work is framed should be as important as what is framed. Such attentive (re)introduction is especially necessary in the case of poet P. Inman, for whom a collected volume could unintentionally reinforce an all-too-persistent tendency among critics to emphasize Inman's methodological and stylistic consistency over and above the innovations within particular poems and the developments between individual books. Thankfully, in large part due to Craig Dworkin's considerable and rigorous introduction, what *Written: 1976-2013* effectively achieves is to give Inman's career the much-needed re-evaluation it deserves.

This is not to say that Inman's work has been simply mischaracterized until now (or even underappreciated). And in terms of style and accompanying poetics, Inman has indeed shown himself committed and unwavering. As Dworkin notes, Marjorie Perloff is not unjustified in typifying elements of Inman's style (namely, its disjunctive syntax and rigorously non-referential use of language) as representative of a certain bygone era in Language writing; nor is Ron Silliman inaccurate when calling attention to this style's persistence across Inman's career. In fact, much of Dworkin's introduction is dedicated to tracing and cataloguing what—intentionally or not—unites the wide range of material that comprises *Written*. Indeed, apart from the work's critical reception, Inman has consistently articulated his poetics as an art of refusal, as an "anti-narrative" counter to traditional narrative modes and strategies. ("Narrative triumphs precisely through the consolidation of isolated detail" he writes in "One to One," his contribution to the influential *Politics of Poetic Form*; "It solidifies. Things all come together



at the end of the episode, denying social atomization by the production of a kind of aesthetic afterlife where things will be made whole again”.<sup>1</sup> Inman has continued to define his poetics more or less in these terms, referring in recent years to his highly punctuated compositions (or “slow writing”) as poetry “under quarantine,” in which language is “too difficult to be seamlessly incorporated.”<sup>2</sup> This anti-narrative commitment indeed does unite much of the varying work collected here and accounts for the perceived continuity of Inman’s output when considered as a whole. Moreover, practically speaking, a body of poetry whose meaning is derived principally from its formal investigations and structural innovations will understandably yield readings which emphasize how the work re-works itself, and how it continues to negate traditional hermeneutical strategies.

Nonetheless, it has become all too easy to merely recognize Inman’s work for what it refutes, negates and refuses than for what it enables, proposes and explores. We do a disservice to the work’s considerable variation by simply stressing the consistencies to be found, both stylistically at the level of composition and methodologically at the level of poetics. Indeed, the great service of Craig Dworkin’s introduction is that it provides a guiding, non-programmatic framework for how to read the actual *poetry*, of which 700+ pages is collected here. Not that Dworkin shies away from theorizing—at one point he argues not unconvincingly that rather than a product or oeuvre, Inman’s poetry consists of a single, unfolding poem or lifework—but rather than replacing reading with a theory of reading, Dworkin has done the work of reading the work, thus granting the reader a better adjusted view of Inman’s actual development from the early works on through the complex structures of the middle period and into the highly-punctuated minimalist compositions of the present.

Chronologically, then, *Written* begins with a batch of uncollected poems—the very earliest books are excluded, though addressed and contextualized by Dworkin—prior to transitioning to the more recognizable work of *Platin* (1979). The inclusion of the early uncollected poems is especially



important, insofar as they demonstrate the development of Inman's formal and stylistic concerns from the period in which he was actively involved with the D.C. poetry scene of the 1970's, which included such innovative poets as Diane Ward, Lynne Dreyer, Tina Darragh and Bruce Andrews. That is, Inman's style was not born in a vacuum nor simply maintained due to a lack of exposure to other aesthetics. Here is a representative excerpt from *Platin*, a short book of seventeen poems of roughly sonnet length:

well, deafing  
 plew, names, ilmls, minor  
 cobble, assist, of, visibles  
 lottle, briar, "croica"  
 hormer, beads  
 aria, brar  
 sprill's, locix, mortar, tax  
 titl, ccells  
 plam, spittle (-y) , clasp, fews  
 cent-ats  
 cork, thoi, prep  
 olin, rubs  
 perq, tracted, immathace, atipiques  
 errit, hist

At first glimpse, readers will certainly recognize hallmark elements of early Language writing, as syntax definitively disrupted is replaced by sound-play: "cobble/lotte", "briar/brar", "locix/tax—" which seemingly steps in where sense departs. Unique to these poems, however, is Inman's signature use of non-words, which are alternately manufactured and spliced/disrupted terms often retaining close proximity to standard words ("locix" is one letter off from "loci", as is the case with "ilmls" ("ills") and "hormer" (perhaps the proper name Homer). Through such attentive dissection and inspection, *Platin* and other early works—*ocker* (1982) and *uneven development* (1984) included—fundamentally concern themselves



with the resistance to (and exploration of) meaning at the level of the signifier, as demonstrated by the proximity of word to non-word, of mere linguistic material to syntactic structure.

From *Think of One* (1986) on through *Red Shift* (1988) and *Criss Cross* (1994), Inman pushes this tension between meaning and non-meaning across a greater variety of forms and structures; as a period of composition, it is significant not for its radical breaks from the early works but for the very real *development* and reworking of their formal implications, even if these implications are felt negatively, as with the detectable reduction of the use of non-standard words in each text. Moreover, this period is important to note insofar as it grounds the minimalist structures and “slow writing” that begins with *Vel* (1995), a transition which may otherwise read as a mere return to the formal concerns of works such as *Platin*.

In *Think of One* for instance, we find a long sequence whose horizontal lines split the page into two competing modules (“nimir”), a double-columned poem (“less of one”) and a sprawling prose piece (“dust bowl”) in which the colon functions as the sole form of punctuation. *Red Shift* similarly consists of three long and distinct works: the sequence “decker,” in which each section (titled pg. 1, pg. 2, etc.) functions as kind of relentless reduction of narrative development (the section pg.2 reads, in its entirety, “eyeds, /dreg, /daint”); this followed by the 25 page title poem “red shift”, composed of stanzas whose individual lines could be read as hyper-compressed poems in their own right (“silos by a stillness/nells from bend, a boil allow/); and finally the much-celebrated “waver,” a restless unpunctuated work whose movement across the page is impossible to adequately excerpt here.

While *Criss Cross* is technically divided up into separate poems, each work bears a stronger relation to one another than either of Inman’s two previous books; when considered in sum, the text functions as a kind of closed system of repeated sounds, words and motifs, demonstrating the kind of “cumulative logic” in a single text that Dworkin charts across Inman’s whole



oeuvre. “Snow,” “white,” “dots,” and “distance” are found throughout, as do terms denoting movement and size. “Smallness,” for example, is particularly important to *Criss Cross*. “smaller,” an uncharacteristically conceptually-minded poem for Inman, gradually reduces across its eight pages into a single utterance: “oipl.” The opening section of “My Drift (*for Bruce Andrews*)” aptly demonstrates the interpretive impasses Inman variously constructs:

“otherwise is that forever.” “a fill of  
sentences the ditch of what I mean.”  
“the wet hole in stubs.” “a pinochle  
as in neutrals.” “what I hear together  
beneath how I orient it.” “the spinach  
of a book the same only two of it.”  
“picture sime.” “awarded grant for  
pulling blinds fits of lessening.”  
“too cold to write about carrotin.”  
“simmon of baptists denominations  
stuck to money.” “people knock on  
the door leaving so much noise.”  
“every of doubt words into distance.”

Here, we’re presented with a dialogue (monologue?) that while resisting context, nonetheless invites the unfolding of a peculiar poetic logic: conceptually, “ditch” is connected to the “wet hole” of line 3. Something the speaker hears is “beneath” the unspecified referent “it” of line 5; and “cold” and “stuck” seem to speak to the experience of being trapped beneath some surface. A similar nexus of like terms is suggested by “neutrals”, “lessening,” “denominations” and “money.” One is tempted to schematize these relations—perhaps the poem dramatizes the relation between absence and presence or quantity and quality—yet while the poem continues on in quotes, these initial themes are not picked up in its subsequent sections. Practically speaking, this may be because “My Drift” is composed



of several unrelated works—a fact that, while omitted by *Written's* formatting, Dworkin notes—but more fundamentally, such a reading requires abstracting from the poem's language in such a way as to deny the poem its singular construction. Indeed, it is arguably the achievement of Inman's work of this period that it remains at once steadfastly answerable to language's materiality while also installing and maintaining across increasingly extensive and complex works the kind of interpretive tension "My Drift" both invites and denies; (a tension that Dworkin rightly points to as the constitutive "balance" to Inman's writing, that which prevents the work from teetering off into utter formalism.)

It is for these very reasons that Inman's development following *Criss Cross* might appear to herald a return to an earlier aesthetic. "Annette", the first poem from *Vel* (1995), opens: "suth. pitted. light. stream./tanned. lemon. (tone. murch)" and indeed would not seem out of place in the earlier books. Rather than a return, however, we find Inman practicing what he terms "slow writing," in which "any unitary word" is "a point of resistance, an interruption in the ongoing transmission."<sup>3</sup> The long poem "kilter," with its many contrasting sections of heavily punctuated lines and even words, is characteristic of Inman's attempt to reclaim language not only from its ideologically programmed usage, but from the pace at which it is deployed:

bo.nes. to. a. pause.  
his. mid.st. the. lon.ger  
he. cont.ained. ball. point arou.  
ballp.oint. aro.und. glim.pse  
the. hau.nch. in.a lie.

Inman's trajectory up through *per se* (2012) continues to restlessly arrest the reader's attention, while conducting these excursions with increasing economy. Indeed, each word weighed, tended to and given its own space is oftentimes permanently installed in a visual field which alone gives them their meaning (as with poems from *ad infinitum* (2008) such as "roscoe



mitchell (nonahh)” or “14 panels for lynne dreyer”). When words do successfully form pronouncements, these sentences are summarily broken down into smaller units, as if without some formal de-familiarization poetry indeed verges on “s,e,l,l,i,n,g,t,h,e,v,o,i,c,e,o,f,t,h,e,b,o,s,s,t,o,t,h,e,p,e,o,p,l,e”. In this tactical turn towards delay and stoppage, we find, “time. occupied.of.its.language”, as Inman states in his poem for Walter Benjamin, “now/time”: that is, a sudden halt and subsequent focusing and reframing of the present, for, indeed, “thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.”<sup>4</sup>

In this way, Inman’s recent work strikingly contrasts with 21<sup>st</sup> century literary formations such as Flarf and Conceptualism, both of which attempt in their own ways to reclaim language from its instrumental, marketable, Likeable usage. From one perspective, in light of the communicative and cultural upheavals our century has witnessed thus far, Inman’s persistence with a disjunctive, non-referential mode of composition could be read as the gesture of a purist, of an artist unwilling to constructively engage and parse through today’s political and cultural ephemera. Yet at a time when what is avant-garde seems most forcefully embodied by Kenneth Goldsmith’s 1000 Poets Project, Inman’s continued commitment to the careful, calculated transformation of language stands as a welcome provocation, posing as it does its long, laborious work against the free play of appropriative impulse. Indeed, even in his treatment of the word itself, Inman’s trademark non-words strangely contrast with a poetics birthed post-Internet, in which even as harmlessly mediating a function as “Autocorrect” effectively serves to uphold language’s standard and accepted usage. In this sense, *Written* actually points to and clarifies the debates on expression, authenticity and authorship so formative to Flarf’s appropriation of search-engine collages and Conceptualism’s reframing of source materials through displacement: that is, the goal of seizing-hold of the communicative means of production is pursued in Inman’s work through the excavation and working upon of language—a fact made visible even by Inman’s critical reflections, which are not abstract manifestos of aims and intents but tactical documents meant



for practical deployment. (I would suspect it is precisely this persistent, irreducible dialectic between author function and discursive object throughout a seemingly “egoless” body of work that undoubtedly fascinates the Conceptually-oriented Dworkin.)

As such, Inman’s art should not be understood as simply *of* or *against* the times, neither as the mere fulfillment of historical context nor the resistance to it. “All reification is a form of forgetting,” quips Adorno.<sup>5</sup> This holds true for how we conceive of avant-garde formations as much as it does of careers. Thankfully, with *Written: 1976-2013* we are given not simply the text and its context, in which the work and its world are tidily reconciled, but a genuine engagement with both; indeed, a critical re-reading of what was has been written.

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Inman, *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. Roof Books, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> P. Inman, “Notes on Slow Writing”, *Philly Talks* 14

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Schocken Books, 2007. 263.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, 2002.342-343







## CONTRIBUTORS

**GHAYATH ALMADHOUN** is a Palestinian poet born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, Syria 1979. He studied Arabic Literature at Damascus University and has published three collections of poetry. He emigrated to Sweden in 2008, where he now lives and work. In Sweden he has published two collections of poetry; the latest, *Till Damaskus*, he wrote together with the Swedish poet Marie Silkeberg, with whom he also has made several poetry films. Has been translated to Swedish, German, Dutch Greek, Slovenian, Italian, English, French, Danish and Chinese, etc.

**ANNE BOYER** is a poet who lives in Kansas City.

**CACONRAD's** childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He is the author of eight books of poetry and essays; the latest *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books) is the winner of the 2015 Believer Magazine Book Award. He is a 2015 Headlands Art Fellow, and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Banff, Ucross, RADAR, and the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. He conducts workshops on (Soma)tic Poetry and Ecopoetics. Visit him online at [CAConrad.blogspot.com](http://CAConrad.blogspot.com).

**ALLISON COBB** is a poet who lives in Portland, OR, where she co-curates the reading, performance and art series The Switch. Her latest book, *After we all died*, is forthcoming in 2016 from Ahsahta Press.

**CATHERINE COBHAM** is a lecturer in Arabic and head of the department of Arabic and Persian at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. She has translated a number of contemporary authors from Arabic, including Naguib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Darwish, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Fu'ad al-Takarli.

**ALICIA COHEN** was born in San Diego in 1970. She is a poet and the author of *Coherer* (Verge, 2015), *Debts and Obligations* (O Books), and *bEAR* (Handwritten Press). Her critical writing has appeared in various journals, including *HOW2* and



*Ecopoetics*. She has taught at Reed College and Portland State University. Based in Portland, Oregon, she presently lives in Bergen, Norway.

**JEN COLEMAN** is author of *Psalms for Dogs and Sorcerers* (Trembling Pillow Press 2014). She lives in Portland, OR, where she co-curates the Spare Room reading series.

**DAVID COLMER** is an Australian translator who lives in Amsterdam. He has won several major prizes for his translations of Dutch literature.

**THOM DONOVAN** lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is the author of *The Hole* (Displaced Press, 2012) and *Withdrawn* (Compline Editions, 2014).

**STEVEN FARMER's** books include *Coracle*, *Tone Ward*, *World of Shields*, *Glowball* and *Medieval*. He currently lives in the Bay Area (California) where he works as a technical writer in the software and utility industries. He is co-curator of the Poetic Labor Project.

**RYAN GATO** is a Brooklyn-based poet and contributing editor to Roof Books.

**SARAH HAYDEN** writes about and lectures on literature and visual culture and sometimes gets to do poems. She is currently in the process of relocating from Cork (the SoundEye city) in Ireland to an as yet unidentified point on or just off the south coast of England.

**DANNY HAYWARD** lives in a part of London where the average house 'earns' more than the average police officer.

**ERICA KAUFMAN** is the author of *Instant Classic* (Roof 2013). She lives in the woods.

**FRANCES KRUK** is author of *lo-fi frags in-progress* (Veer, 2015) and currently lives in Calgary.

**DANIELLE LaFRANCE** lives on the traditional territory of the Musqueam, Skxwú7mesh-ulh Úxwumixw (Squamish), Stó:lo and Tsleil-Waututh nations. She is a poet, librarian, MA student, and co-organizer of the feminist materialist reading/discussion group and journal series, *About a Bicycle*. *Friendly + Fire* is forthcoming this year from Talon.



**NICH MALONE** is a poet from South San Francisco. He currently lives in Sacramento.

**SHEILA MANNIX** lives in West Cork, Ireland. <http://www.sheilamannix.wordpress.com>

**LILA MATSUMOTO** was raised in the US and lives (most of the time) in Scotland; her chapbook *Allegories from my Kitchen* was published by Sad Press in Spring 2015.

**CÉSAR MORO** (born Alfredo Quíspez Asín in 1903) was a Peruvian Surrealist poet who wrote in Spanish and French. He spent many years in Paris and in Mexico in connection with artists and poets such as Andre Breton, Leonora Carrington, Wolfgang Paalen, Benjamin Péret, Remedios Varo, Xavier Villaurrutia, et al. While in Mexico he wrote his best-known collection of Spanish poetry, *La tortuga ecuestre*. He died in 1956.

**LAURA MORIARTY**'s recent books include *The Fugitive Notebook* (Couch Press, 2014), *Who That Divines* (Nightboat Books, 2014), *A Tonalist* (Nightboat Books, 2010), and *A Semblance: Selected and New Poems, 1975-2007* (Omni Dawn, 2007). She lives in Richmond, CA.

**MARIANNE MORRIS** is a writer who lives in Oakland, CA. Glyphosate, the active ingredient in the herbicide Roundup, was originally patented as a chelator. It bonds to minerals like calcium, iron, magnesium and manganese, and removes them. When you spray a chelator on farmland and food, how many nutrients are chelated from soil and crops? How many are chelated from our bodies? We are dead stars looking back up at the sky. LOVE is going to make the worst possible thing change its course out of darkness.

**KRISTIN PALM** is the author of *The Straits*. She is a once-and-again Detroit, recently returned from Oakland, CA.

**JULIAN FRANCIS PARK** grew up in Vashon Island, WA and until recently resided in Providence, RI. He currently lives in Oakland and is getting a poetry MFA at Mills College. Lately he has been writing poems on cops.

**DAVID W. PRITCHARD** is one of the coeditors of *INDUSTRIAL LUNCH*, a magazine of poetry and visual art. His work has appeared in *Tammy*, *TINGE*, *Route 9*, and elsewhere. He lives in Amherst.



**ESTEBAN A. QUISPE** is a student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, studying Modern Languages and specializing in Spanish and French. He has been published in the UCSD journal of translation *Alchemy*.

**WILL ROWE** has two recent books: *Nation* (Knives, Forks and Spoons) and *Corpses* (a translation of Néstor Perlongher's poem *Cadáveres*, published by Rob Kiely). Crater are bringing out his Collected Poems in the new year.

**LINDA RUSSO** ([inhabitorypoetics.blogspot.com](http://inhabitorypoetics.blogspot.com)) is the author of *Mirth*, *Meaning to Go to the Origin in Some Way*, and *To Think of Her Writing Awash in Light*. She lives in the inland Northwestern United States.

**NIBIA PASTRANA SANTIAGO** is a dance artist based in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**FRANK SHERLOCK** is the author of *Space Between These Lines Not Dedicated* (ixnay, 2014), among many other books. He is the 2014-2015 poet laureate of Philadelphia.

**JAMES SHERRY** is the author of 12 books of poetry and prose, most recently *Oops! Environmental Poetics*. He is the editor of Roof Books and founder of the Segue Foundation. He lives in NYC.

**ERIC SNEATHEN** is a poet and PhD student who splits his time between Oakland and Santa Cruz. He is the author of *Snail Poems*, forthcoming from Krupskaya in 2016.

**JULIANA SPAHR** lives in Berkeley.

**BERT STABLER** ([bertstabler.com](http://bertstabler.com)) is a flatland dilettante, currently in grad school in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, writing a lot about solitary confinement and sadism. Along with his wife Katie, he co-runs a gallery space out of a small hut in their backyard, known as the Outhaus.

**KO KO THETT** is a Burmese poet and literary translator. A collection of his poems, *the burden of being burmese*, published by Zephyr in 2015, is arguably the first full-length poetry book in English by a Burma-born poet. He currently lives in Belgium.

**TC TOLBERT** is alive and living mostly in Tucson but sometimes everywhere else.



**SAMANTHA WALTON** lives in Bristol, writes poetry and teaches English Literature at Bath Spa University.

**NACHOEM M. WIJNBERG** is a Dutch poet and novelist, as well as a professor at the University of Amsterdam Business School. His award-winning poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies in many languages, including a recent selection of English translations appeared under the title *Advance Payment* (Anvil Poetry Press), a complete Italian translation of *Divan of Ghalib*, and an English translation of that same book to be published in the U.S. by White Pine Press.

**ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON** is a (recovering) scholar of early modern drama who lives in Olympia, WA and teaches at The Evergreen State College.

**TYRONE WILLIAMS** teaches literature at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

**JENNIFER K WOFFORD** is a San Francisco-based artist, illustrator and educator.

**D/WOLACH** is a poet, former union organizer, and author, most recently, of *Hospitality* (Tarpaulin Sky Press, 2013) who lives in Olympia, WA and teaches at The Evergreen State College.

**YUH-SHIOH WONG** (b. 1977 Taipei, Taiwan) obtained a BA in Visual and Environmental Studies from Harvard University, an MFA in Painting from Hunter College in NYC, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2003. She was an Artist in Residence at The Chinati Foundation in Marfa, TX in 2013, and is represented in San Francisco, CA by Anthony Meier Fine Arts. She has exhibited widely across the US and currently lives and works in the Bay Area.

**HERIBERTO YÉPEZ** is an anti-Nafta writer born in Mexico. He has published two dozen books in Spanish and a couple in English. He lives between the Bay Area and Tijuana.

**MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI** is the author of *Companion Animal* (Litmus 2015) and *The Bruise* (FC2 2008); she lives in Athens, GA.





GHAYATH ALMADHOUN  
ANNE BOYER  
CACONRAD  
ALLISON COBB  
CATHERINE COBHAM  
ALICIA COHEN  
JEN COLEMAN  
DAVID COLMER  
THOM DONOVAN  
STEVEN FARMER  
RYAN GATO  
SARAH HAYDEN  
DANNY HAYWARD  
ERICA KAUFMAN  
FRANCES KRUK  
DANIELLE LAFRANCE  
NICH MALONE  
SHEILA MANNIX  
LILA MATSUMOTO  
CÉSAR MORO  
LAURA MORIARTY  
MARIANNE MORRIS  
KRISTIN PALM

JULIAN FRANCIS PARK  
DAVID W. PRITCHARD  
ESTEBAN A. QUISPE  
WILL ROWE  
LINDA RUSSO  
NIBIA PASTRANA SANTIAGO  
FRANK SHERLOCK  
JAMES SHERRY  
ERIC SNEATHEN  
JULIANA SPAHR  
BERT STABLER  
KO KO THETT  
TC TOLBERT  
SAMANTHA WALTON  
NACHOEM M. WIJNBERG  
ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON  
TYRONE WILLIAMS  
JENNIFER K WOFFORD  
d/wOLACH  
YUH-SHIOH WONG  
HERIBERTO YÉPEZ  
MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI

OAKLAND : 2016 : \$15