2019–2023

SELECTED ESSAYS

PETER VALENTE

SELECTED ESSAYS, 2019–2023

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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1

The Internet Killed the Video Star

On Masha Tupitsyn's *Picture Cycle* (Semiotext(e), 2019)

> Film — the screen — used to be a lot quieter. Like there were breaths between the frames. A horizon. Digital means no breath. Digital means seamless. Means the image never ends.
>
> — Masha Tupitsyn

1.

I remember riding around New Jersey in Tom's small beat up Honda with everything from the Buzzcocks to The Smiths playing on the car radio, as we talked and laughed with friends on our way to the beach, or to a live concert, or to a night club in New York.[1] This was the summer of '88. I was eighteen years old. I remember going to Tower records on Broadway to buy the newest release by Billy Bragg or The Jesus and Mary Chain. New Order's *Power, Corruption, and Lies* was one of my favorite albums from that time and I played it constantly in my parent's

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Another Chicago Magazine,* October 17, 2020.

basement where the stereo was. I remember going out to the Limelight and various other clubs, dancing all night and drinking too much, and wandering the New York City streets at dawn on my way home to New Jersey. I remember long hours alone, in my parent's house, being simply bored, with nothing to do; I couldn't sleep. So I read. I'd read for a while but then do nothing; maybe I talked on the phone a bit. But this sense of boredom, this sense of doing nothing, was not an oppressive feeling; I never felt, during this time, that I had to do something, that I had to be productive. This was before the internet and cell phones deceived us all into thinking that every moment is precious and must be "saved"; there is now the illusion that something is always happening, that you may miss something: an email with urgent news, or some video on YouTube about the current political situation, or a friend's "like" or comment on a Facebook post. Masha Tupitsyn, in her recent book, *Picture Cycle,* writes: "Simply put, Facebook isn't significant because everyone uses it. It's significant because we are it. Perhaps like Bowie we are aliens, allowing our bodies to be invaded by the digital."

2.

Now the immaterial is charged with meaning; the virtual is given substance. In our media-saturated culture a prime importance is given to our visual sense: We are bombarded with images, via the internet or on our cell phones. I haven't owned a television for almost ten years; I didn't switch to digital back when you were forced to do it, and never had cable growing up. We think there is always something new that we must focus our attention on; we are literally bound to a screen, waiting for something to happen. Expectant. When fabricated images become so much a part of our lives, it is necessary to ask the question of whether anything is authentic anymore. Images on our phones can be manipulated, photoshopped; everybody knows that. But still we look and look and look, scrolling up and down Facebook, for example. Tupitsyn suggests in such a culture, with movies

generating images for our consumption on a monumental scale, that these images have seeped into our consciousness to inform how we act and who we are. Life itself is nothing, now, but a proliferation of images and noise, in surround sound; people are not who they were once, unique and with an inner life, but rather, actors in the great drama of life, starring in their own movie, informed by what they have seen on the screen, fearing or relishing exposure.

3.

The world is not the world anymore; it is simply a collection of images, data points, saved messages, selfies, on a computer screen or iPhone. It is surface effects without substance, and thus not subject to duration. The way we live now is a matter of speed and productivity; we have internalized the overworked production scheme at the basis of capitalism, and become willing subjects. The average length of a shot in a typical Hollywood action film is 2 seconds. We are in a rush. I've noticed that for certain articles online there is the provision: a three-minute read. Because an article longer than that makes a demand on our time to think and we are not willing to accept that. We are in a rush. Going where, exactly?

4.

Digital space is immaterial and pure, and time in the digital world is theoretically infinite, but there is never enough time in a 24-hour day to get what you want done, done. Where has the time gone? Our sense of time is completely destabilized with the creation of a seamless digital world where there is no loss, no time wasted, no decay. A Facebook post will appear, and then, in a split second, another image is produced to replace it, on and on, according to an algorithm; there is almost no delay, and no loss as the posts are relegated into a kind of digital oblivion. We fear losing time. Having nothing to do. Not being productive. Being good servants. Being good capitalists.

5.

We talk of actors and actresses, comment on their lives, their performances in movies, the way they dress; we think they are just like us, at least, we act like we do. As young people we learn about love on the screen; we dream of lovers based on images we've seen in the movies (in the '80s, John Hughes's teenage romances were important to me and my friends). Until we are just like them. Just like the advertisements on the internet that give us a model of life to live up to, or at least we thought it was something possible or even desirable. And these images, Tupitsyn says, have become us; we are the images, the actors in a drama called life. Tupitsyn writes about the actor John Cusack that he, "eschews the pretense of realism of an earlier generation of less reflexive Method actors, instead fashioning a style of portrayal that is less immersive and more annotative of the nature of acting and persona — the way that acting is a condition that belongs to all of us, not just the actor." Furthermore, Tupitsyn writes, "If acting is a condition of life, it is hard for any of us to know not only what is real and what is fake, but the relation between the two. In today's surround-sound media culture, the real question is: where and when does acting happen? And: is it ever not happening now?"

6.

As the world recedes, we are given in its place a seamless digital copy, a simulacrum. Where life was once discontinuous, boring, joyful, and sad, we now have the eternal hope for a kind of digital paradise, where there is no loss, where one is constantly preoccupied, obsessed, but with a sense of mourning, a sense of something missing, a lack. Tupitsyn quotes Jean Baudrillard, from *Consumer Society,* "You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of 'missing' something, some form of enjoyment or other. It is no longer desire, or even 'taste,' or a specific inclination that are at stake, but a generalized curiosity, driven by a vague sense of unease." Everywhere you

look there is something to occupy your time with. Look at your cell phone, at your email, go on Facebook, post something on Instagram, go on Twitter, check news articles, etc. The hours pass and pass with no sense of duration; it's as though no time has passed at all. But you look at the time and really five hours have passed. Where has the time gone?

7.

Reality itself has changed into something else. The virtual has now become real. People no longer look at each other on the subway, or even in the street. And they don't have to. New York City is no longer the "dangerous" place it used to be, where you had to look in front of you, and be more aware of your surroundings. More conscious. Awake. Consciousness has altered in the digital age. We have become less aware of our surroundings, less conscious of the people we encounter; we believe and get solace from the virtual, rather than the real. Reality is not kind but the virtual can be whatever you want it to be and that is a kind of solace. You're more in control of your environment online. But you ask yourself what or who is real. Tupitsyn writes, "Now more than ever, with aesthetics, fame, technology, and identity in such radical flux, who's really who, and what's really what, continues to be the great mystery?"

8.

We live in an eternal present now, with no before or after. There is no tomorrow on the computer screen. It is on all the time. It knows us better than we know ourselves. It is us. Unlike radio, and even television, there is no break in the continuous rush of images:

> When radio first came into the world, sound came on and off like that too. Radio did what TV did. Said goodnight. Radio had a time you couldn't just catch any time. Couldn't just

> hear again. Couldn't repeat. The radio would turn on. You would turn off… The 70s are like vinyl. They had a texture. They sputtered. There was a silence that startled the music. The music had scratches. The circle got worn, in time. By time…You had to be careful not to wear the needle or the record out, but you don't have to be careful anymore.

Now you could have the music on continuously; a playlist on your computer that repeats and repeats, no need for you to do anything, no need for any human intervention. But taking a vinyl record out of its sleeve, placing it on the turntable, and then carefully placing the needle on the groove, took time; time passed, and where there was silence there was now sound. Time was not continuous; there were gaps, and these gaps made the experience human. "Video killed the radio star" becomes "the internet killed the video star."

9.

Tupitsyn speaks of our present world as the "postsexual techno-world" where "desire is everywhere and nowhere at all. For everyone to see but no one to actually have. You desire precisely because you don't have any real desire for the real world." The discourse on love is everywhere present but nowhere seen for real. Think of the movies. Where love is almost always present in one form or another. But for Tupitsyn, there were no images for the kind of woman she wanted to be:

> Nora and I thought images belonged to men. We thought images were the road to adulthood, agency, and independence. We thought boys could be what they wanted to be. Images taught us — even if our parents didn't — that men, not women, were independent. Romantic. Creative. Passionate. We didn't see the girls we wanted to be onscreen, so we thought being some kind of boy was to be some kind of image of a man. But everything is an image now and the image is now everything. Not just part of who you are and

> where you came from, the image is now the thing you see, the thing you are, before you do anything. Think anything. Want anything. There is no you first, only a me that performs; that is a commodity, a notion that comes from a culture of images that are meant to act for and instead of us.

And this virtually cancels difference. Cancels the individual, what is unique in an individual, what differentiates them from the crowd. The sameness of things is a function of the digital world. There is really no depth or substance to an image on a screen's surface; life is all about the surface of things. What is visible and what is hidden. It is also about exposure. Everything, they tell you, is on the internet. You can find everything there. It is more satisfying than the real world. But then, what is the real world now? And who are we? Tupitsyn writes: "how can you keep your distance from something or someone if you don't know who or what that thing is? If that thing looks like you and you look like that thing. If you can't tell anything apart. You can't, and since you can't, you don't, and when you don't, difference and distinctions are eroded. Yuppies go below 14th Street. Sometimes a book is a cover."

10.

Tupitsyn's *Picture Cycle* contains a number of brilliant examinations of gender in film such as her discussion of Albert Serra's *Story of My Death,* a film where the aging lover, Casanova, encounters Dracula during a journey to Transylvania. During the trip, Tupitsyn notes, Casanova asks his manservant if he "likes the 'half-light' that befalls them." He answers, "Not much." But Casanova surrenders to its melancholy: "It's like undergarments." Tupitsyn continues:

> Romanticism, the birth of the repressed (it's here that Freud appears, as does cinema) is the psychosexual undergarment that lies beneath the "civilized" dress of rationalism. Just as Dracula lies beneath the century that is Casanova. While

> Casanova is familiar with a calculated narrative of the bottom — *he's tried it all* — Dracula's chaotic vision heralds something else, something total — beyond discourse and pleasure: the unconscious … Dracula's polyamory in the face of Victorian hypocrisy is a cover for power lust. His castle of women recalls Charles Manson's family in the 1960s LA. Serra's somber Dracula is a beguiling, manipulative rogue who will appear throughout history again and again.

The appearance of Donald Trump on the stage of history is an example of such a man, who has abused women, and tried to cover it up, and manipulated an entire country into believing his lies. And he has done that partly by using Twitter! Which leads to an aspect of what Tupitsyn calls the post-cinematic age, "where vulgarity, excess, and corruption move from off-screen to on-camera." There is a new kind of "paradigm of criminality: the exposure of (and public outcry over) crimes in place of actual justice[…]. [A] terminal phase of 'enlightened self-consciousness' whereby all forms of power have been unmasked with no change in behavior." This is a perfect description the world under Trump. Here I'm also reminded of a poem by Tom Savage:

> Punk Capitalism
>
> Everybody talks about the environment
> But nobody does anything about it.
> What has posterity ever done for us?
> Equality was a great word, wasn't it?
> This is not a generous society, buster.
> We have abandoned a zeal, our special attention.
> Individualism is a pejorative in French.
> What happened to our small town socialism
> Used to raise barns and build schools?
> Television has happened to language.
> The use of adjectives for everything
> Poisons the minds of small children.

Speaking about the '80s film, *The Karate Kid,* Tupitsyn writes:

> [T]he individual male, ethnic, and working class body itself is the Achilles heel of the larger national, masculine body, and in order to understand it, Daniel's is deconstructed and slowly reassembled like an old car. He is a body that garners strength through the deliberate, menial, and symbolic: sanding floors, waxing cars, painting houses and fences. It learns, trains, and becomes (emotionally, not necessarily technically) "skilled" via general tasks (labor) whose spiritual significance is slowly unveiled. This, the film points out, is the one thing the rich blonde villains in the movie never had to do. For them, the body is a playground, a joyride, like every other machine they cruise around.

When reading this passage, I thought of the status of immigrants in the Trump administration; how they are demonized just like those who are gay or lesbian or Muslim. When Trump says the only immigrants worthy to enter the United States should be "skilled" in order to contribute to the economy, he is really only thinking of himself, or those who are wealthy like him, so they can keep the capitalist wheel turning with no benefit to the poor. When reading Tupitsyn's brilliant interrogation of male power in Stanley Kubrick's The Shining, I kept thinking of the "Me Too" movement, and especially of Trump's attempts to cover up his sexual escapades, and of Harvey Weinstein's sexual misconduct:

> While Freud notes that the neurotic is our "best source of knowledge," despite experience, most women do not "suffer" from enough expectant anxiety when it comes to their fear of men. For fear of men, especially cis white ones, is treated as neurotic (invented). The wrong fear to have if you want to be/feel "right." It is Wendy and Danny who experience fear from the threat of Jack's *neurotic* violence (he can't write, he can't father, he can't take care of the Overlook) turned real (he tries to kill his family because he cannot find successful

substitutes). Men are the external world and the horror genre is predicated on the contract between women doubting their fears and the world doubting women.

11.

Masha Tupitsyn's *Picture Cycle* is one of the best books on our contemporary culture; she is a brilliant film critic and one of the most important and innovative writers of our time. Her examination of gender in film is one that is urgently needed in these times, and her studies of male power are some of the most powerful and important that I've read. In a time when LGBTQ2SIA+ people are under attack by a right wing that is absolutely out of control, her insights are truly illuminating and speak to the essential problems of our heteronormative narratives, destabilizing their allegories of male power. Her use of autobiography in her critical essays is what makes them both tender and beautiful. I didn't get a computer until about seven years ago, and just typed most of my own work on an electric typewriter; I didn't get a cell phone until about five years ago. Since I only recently entered the digital world, I was profoundly affected by Tupitsyn's work. She is a light in the growing darkness and for that I am thankful her books are in the world.

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2

Not Either/Or but Both

On Rebekah Rutkoff's *The Irresponsible Magician: Essays and Fictions* (Semiotext(e), 2015)

While reading Rebekah Rutkoff's *The Irresponsible Magician,* I kept thinking of this passage from Clarice Lispector's *Água Viva*[1]:

> I'll return to the unknown part of myself and when I am born shall speak of "he" or "she." For now, what sustains me is the "that" that is an "it." To create a being out of oneself is very serious. I am creating myself. And walking in complete darkness in search of ourselves is what we do. It hurts. But these are the pains of childbirth: a thing is born that is. Is itself. It is hard as a dry stone. But the core is soft and alive, perishable, perilous, *it*. Life of elementary matter.[2]

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop,* 2015.

2 Clarice Lispecter, *Água Viva,* trans. Stefan Tobler (New Directions, 2012), 39.

The I is unstable, multiple, and identity is fluid in Rutkoff's book of stories and essays, as she plays with the genres of fiction and autobiography, complicating the narrative "I." This is captured in "A Valentine for Mr. Wonderful," where she writes that while attending a dinner for Varnedoe's Jackson Pollock retrospective at MoMA, she "experienced the rewards of not knowing who I was in such a clean, bubble-like way. I drank so much that I insisted on taking the subway home, and woke up when the D line terminated at Brighton Beach." Here is the freedom of movement, but not towards a specific destination; forget "yourself." Michaux: "don't let 'you' take over, you are contagious to yourself." In the fictionalized autobiographical works, she assumes and discards roles, and in one case, "the cutting edge of gender softens"; her fictions are performative. This is how we are in society, adopting identities, "performing" in various social situations, adopting "roles," depending on where we are or who we are with. But there are those moments when we are simply outside of ourselves, and in these moments, magic is possible.

This exploration of identity as performance can also be seen in Rutkoff's essays, as well as in her "fictions," such as the one she titles, "The Splatter Technique: An Interior Monologue Between the Narrator and Carolee Schneeman." Here the "I" speaking a monologue is stretched to include both the narrator (herself) and the filmmaker (also as herself) in dialogue. As such, she can engage with a subject more openly and be critical as well, without the limit imposed by the "I." She is not either/or but both. She is assuming a role while also "being herself." This is a kind of magic, but not the formal kind with ceremonies and candles; it is an irresponsible magic, in the sense that it does not obey the dictates of identity, or conventional autobiography and fiction. In several of these fictions, she is critical of the notion of celebrity; about Philip Roth, who she encounters in a restaurant, surrounded by fans, she writes, "It was essentially a come-sit-on-Santa's-lap situation, and everyone, mostly the young women, took turns." Art historian and curator, Peter Galassi, "was tall, and he had his hand on the smalls of quite a few women's backs." Women are objectified: "I met Bill Eggleston in the back office

of Southside Gallery in Oxford. He was drunk and asked me to sit on his lap and said he hated big breasts." And about the filmmaker, Haskell Wexler, she writes, "I love *Medium Cool* and I was surprised that Haskell had so many sports cars, but he's gentle, and you sort of forgive his tasteless relationship to his wealth because you hope it's just an accident." In this digital age, image is everything. Rutkoff is critical of this spectacle, especially when it drives the egos of famous people, who feel at liberty to assert their sexual dominance.

In her section on Michael Auder, the experimental filmmaker, Rutkoff quotes from William James's essay "Stream of Thought," where he indicates a breach in the continuity of consciousnesses:

> The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's. Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law.

But these "contiguous spheres" of consciousness bleed into each other. Mind permeates matter. What appears as discrete, and as a series of stops and starts, is also continuous. In so far as we identify and categorize, we see things as separate, but as the uncertainty principle in physics shows us, we cannot know a particle's mass if we know its speed; that is, as we define the particle, it becomes discrete but in fact it is continuous. It is both particle *and* wave. One interesting case in Auder's film shows both the continuity of a conversation and the breach James was talking about; here it is caused by a mishearing. A daughter and father are talking about her boyfriend and the father is opposed to their seeing each other:

> Daughter: Mama wants to know if it's convenient for you to talk to him?

Father: Talk to *her*?
Daughter: Yeah. Alright 'cause there's something she's gotta tell you…
Father: Is it about you?
Daughter: Yeah.
Father: What is it now?
Daughter: You're gonna be disappointed but it's something.
Father: Don't tell me you saw Billy again.

The daughter uses the pronoun "him" indicating that the father should talk to the boyfriend. But the father hears it as "her," indicating he should talk to his wife. This mistake shows how the continuity of a conversation is subject to a breach, an error in interpretation, as in a Freudian slip. The contact between subjective worlds is subject to error and misinterpretation and not absolute truth. Identity is not stable. Not black and white.

The essay, "The Art of Transcribing a Sunset," on Claude Lévi-Strauss, is crucial to her poetics. She is not interested in the construction of solid structures but fluid poetic spaces, that are not closed but open; she subverts the idea of the singular authorial presence, and assumes multiple voices. In this essay, she points out that Lévi-Strauss's professional language becomes unstable and poetic in his attempt to "transcribe" the sunset he witnessed while on a boat travelling to Brazil. The wide ocean can be seen as a maternal space, a womb that gives birth to change, transforming those who travel upon her waters: "The sunset-inspired, voyage-out narratives of anthropologists deserve our attention: ship-board preludes to fieldwork tell us much about the stimulation and imagination of an anthropological mind before the purported objects of study have been reached." Lévi-Strauss is no longer acting as an anthropologist; his professional identity is no longer something he can rely on. Curiously, he believes that if he is able to accomplish this task of finding a language that can convey the sunset, which is so "unstable and so resistant to description," he will have discovered the "deepest secrets of my profession." It is a striking statement coming from an anthropologist.

The exact description of the sunset has not been named yet, therefore formalized. Once named it denotes a thing that happened, which is finite. The "sunset," prior to being named, is infinite, an open possibility of being named, an "effect" without a "cause" yet. The truth about reality is not in conventional, administrative, professional, even academic, language, but in the poetic, that which lies hidden, mysterious, infinitely open, and that emerges when the frames in which we commonly view ourselves and the world break down. The excess then floods in. And we are overwhelmed. Speak in tongues. In viewing the sunset, Lévi-Strauss uses phrases like "bloated and ethereal ramparts, all glistening, like mother of pearl, with pink, mauve, and silvered gleams" or "streaks of dappled blondness decomposing into nonchalant twists." The language has become visual and poetic.

But then this poetic evocation alters as the night arrives. Lévi-Strauss returns to his identity as an anthropologist, a professional, a structuralist, a writer, and "the turning of the sky is linked to forms of art": "Daybreak is a prelude, the close of day an overture which occurs at the end instead of the beginning, as in old operas." The poetic sky is subsumed under notions of art and culture, of civilization, custom, and identity. Recalling the Lispector quote, the "it" has now become a "she" or "he." Cultured. Civilized. Either /or instead of Both. Black and White without the diversity of Color.

In the essay, "The Incubators," Rutkoff writes, "I think of H.D. and [Gregory] Markopoulos as kindred protectors of the poetics of separation. They prevent overlap and merger between discrete images, and know the importance of singling out frames, symbols and colors in the process of divining, naming and reordering one's own objects, psychic and material." Then she quotes from H.D.'s poem, "Magician": "I say, / take colour; / break white into red, / into blue / into violet / into green; / I say, / take each separately, / the white will slay." Here again we have the balance of the discrete and the continuous, the merging and the separation. The white contains all colors without

diversity; it stands for homogenization, and is dangerous. Think of our present time, where we see the emergence of nationalism and the attacks on Black Lives Matter by white power groups. Diversity is what matters: colors and not the uniformity of white. In alchemy one must s*olve et coagula* (dissolve and coagulate). We are singular but also plural, I but also We; all the pronouns, collective but diverse.

The colors in Rutkoff's photographs are not vibrant or loud but rather quiet and subtle; the eye focuses on the pale pink tablecloth in one photo, or a strip of rainbow on a bed-cloth in another, or glass tumblers where the colors are blurred. The world these photos evoke is fleeting and temporary; they are snapshots from when she was travelling, poetic visions of everyday objects and sometimes people. They complement the fictions and essays since, in their own way, they perform a kind of magic: the transformation of objects into talismans. She is divining, and naming, those things she photographs. They are her secret hieroglyphs of a vanishing world.

Rutkoff's book is not explicitly political; she is concerned with poetics, language, image, and by extension, celebrity. We are not bound by our identity or gender; we can play with the genre of autobiography and fiction. Robert Glück, in *Communal Nude: Collected Essays* (Semiotext(e), 2016), speaking of Dean Smith's *black hole sun #2* (2001), writes, "Like a Rorschach test, Smith's drawings both suggest story and show how chance works against story's seaming inevitability, including the inevitability of the self."[3] For Rutkoff, dreams are a valid form of expression, undercutting the need for linear narrative to determine every aspect of the text. The poetic language of dreams is unstable, subject to fluctuation, change; Lévi-Strauss is unable to maintain this alternate space and reverts to his position as an anthropologist. His magic dissolves. But our identities are also subject to disorientation, from which state emerges the freedom to not have to assume the daily role that society demands. It is

3 Robert Glück, *Communal Nude: Collected Essays* (Semiotext(e)), 2016), 175.

in this freedom, that one becomes an irresponsible magician. Finally, Rebekah Rutkoff's book is one to savor, to think about, and to eventually be awed by, like a great film.

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3

A Book of the Dead

On Henri Lefebvre's *The Missing Pieces* (Semiotext(e), 2014)

"We're all nameless. Incomplete."

— Victor Serge

Henri Lefebvre's *The Missing Pieces* is essentially a list of many artistic works that have been lost. There are floods that destroy entire contents of a library or publishing house; libraries and museums that are bombed during wartime; authors themselves or their spouses or their relatives demanding certain works or letters be burned at their death; those who attempt at their own risk to save what they can of a manuscript; manuscripts left in taxis, never to be found again; distracted painters who paint over an artwork not realizing what they are doing; and finally, there are those works that never came to fruition for one reason or another, never to be known. We are given the misfires, the aborted works, the destroyed works, the mishandled works; the book is a catalogue of brutality, desperation, anger, shame, and failure. It is like seeing the negative of a photo, not the bright image we expect. It is the lack seething behind our feeling of abundance; it is a catalogue of the unfinished, the unknown, the

unknowable. The effect of all the statements is quite devastating, and it reads like a kind of book of the dead. But it is also a magical book where the dead will live again in its pages.

The cumulative effect of reading so much about the loss of artistic works is that, in fact, it appears more likely that a work will not survive than that it will. Or at least, the odds are not stacked in its favor. Of course, this has been the case with ancient works from the Greco-Roman period, whether it is the plays of Sophocles, or the historical works of Livy: What remains is but a fraction of the total. And there are the fragments or the authors we only know of because another has referenced them in a work. Lefebvre writes, "Aristophanes produced forty-four plays, only eleven of which have come down to us." *The Missing Pieces* exposes how little of the total available knowledge of artistic productions we have access to, and how much in fact has been lost. This is something we rarely think about when wandering around, for example, in a bookstore, with shelves of books sometimes rising up to the ceiling, or gazing up at a painting in a museum, surrounded by so many others from the previous centuries, that were preserved. We are saturated with the remains. And it is as though, on the surface there is an abundance rather than a lack; we are given the illusion of stability, an ordered world, where things are numerous and fit exactly in their proper places.

Of course, the internet has contributed to this oversaturation of sound and image; you can live in this orderly, simulated world without ever leaving your home. In fact, a digital image, a series of pixels on a screen, is not actually "real." This lack of stability in the digital image is a result of its insubstantiality; it has no weight or dimension, and its precarious "existence" is in the non-physical space of the digital world, the internet. In this non-space unreal images maintain their fixed places, not affected by the passage of time as a material product would be. These digital images are seemingly infinite; they "exist" out of this world. But of course this is an illusion, a simulation. The precarious nature of our digital technology is not something we often thing about, like our own mortality. It involves a willing

suspension of disbelief that things remain constant though we know, intuitively, this isn't the case. A simple blackout can erase the entire digital world. Who has not felt a sense of panic when the electricity in your home is turned off suddenly and you can't charge your cell phone or computer? The natural world remains untouched but what about all those saved files? What about all those books in the Library of Alexandria that were destroyed? Sometimes, it seems everything will eventually be destroyed by the passage of time, and nothing will remain, due either to human negligence or natural disaster.

Reading Lefebvre's *The Missing Pieces,* I thought of how fragile our artistic works are. He speaks of how a painting of Leonardo da Vinci's was destroyed during the restoration process! And of how several meters of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* were eaten by a dog! Furthermore, Lefebvre writes, "The sixteen drawings offered by Amadeo Modigliani to his lover Anna Akhmatova were 'smoked' by the Red Guards, who used them as cigarette paper," and "The drawings on burnt paper by Patrick Neu were 'vacuumed' by the cleaning staff during the 2003 FIAC [Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain]." These seem like freak accidents but the point of Lefebvre's book is that they are more common than you would think. Everyone has heard about the destruction of the Library of Alexandria in 48 BCE. But can one conceive of the destruction of the entire contents of the Library of Congress or the Frick Museum? What the destruction of the Library of Alexandria meant for the world of knowledge is almost beyond the mind's ability to comprehend. In our own time, Lefebve writes: "On May 29, 2002, three million books go up in smoke in the warehouse fire of the publishing company, Les Belles Lettres, in Gasny in the Department of the Eure," and "The Archaeological Museum of Baghdad is sacked on Friday, April 11, 2003, resulting in the loss of two to three thousand antiquities." What is the effect on a reader when reading this: "During the Second World War, in Grunewald, near Berlin, the home of the physician and musician Max Planck is bombed; his library, his journals, and his entire correspondence are destroyed." It is sobering to think that so much has been lost,

never to be found again. The history of the world is a record of so much loss.

The record of knowledge is so precarious, and contains more questions than certainties, more erasures than one can even imagine. And the effect on our perception of the world is forever altered as a result of this lack, this absence. This is not something that is obvious to us in our daily lives. But what would it mean to have all the books of Livy's *History of Rome,* instead of a few, or all of the plays of Sophocles, instead of a pittance, or the paintings of an artist who is not even considered a footnote in an encyclopedia of art, because all their work was destroyed; or to have the novels, music, paintings, architecture of well-known figures that no longer exist, such as the three hundred and thirty-three Dutch and Flemish masterpieces from the seventeenth century, half of which were destroyed by the Nazis? Furthermore, we have no examples of Ancient Greek painting because they painted on wood. The book reminds one that simple mistakes could potentially have devastating consequences on the historical record.

Lefebvre's book is also a catalogue of human failure, despair, and anger: Ted Hughes destroyed one of Sylvia Plath's journals after her death; André Gide's cousin destroyed his letters to her; Nikolai Gogol burned a section of his manuscript, *Dead Souls*; as a result of his novel *Stephen Hero* being rejected by publishers, James Joyce attempted to burn the manuscript but his wife Nora was able to preserve a fifth of the text, suffering burns to her arm in the process. Furthermore, Lefebvre writes, "Eleven letters from Lewis Carrol to Alice Liddell are listed among his works; all the others were destroyed by Alice's mother because of their contents," and "Jean Dubuffet destroys most of his canvases in 1924; around 1950, he falls out with Jean Paulhan and burns the quasi-totality of letters received from him." In the book, there are so many descriptions like the ones above where the artist destroys his own work out of, perhaps, a sense of failure; there are also so many diaries, letters, and journals destroyed out of anger or perhaps to hide the history of a correspondence. As a result the particular history of a correspondence contains a

lack, is incomplete. Furthermore, Raymond Radiquet's lover Jean Cocteau suppressed sixteen pages from his novel, *Count d'Orgel's Ball,* after his death in 1923. All these examples show that Lefebvre's book is a powerful document of human fragility. In a sense, the experience of reading this book is like looking at an old photograph of one's grandparents; one imagines all the knowledge that dies with them, never to be recorded.

But throughout the book, this emphasis on lack achieves a kind of momentum that feels like a conjuration. Lefebvre is calling our attention, if only for a brief moment, to these artistic works that no longer exist and in doing so, he performs a kind of resurrection of the dead. He validates the "existence" of these works as a testament to the human spirit, its desires, failures, passions, and losses. In this, the human is as fragile as their art, subject to random events and precarious desires in the pursuit of their own creativity and thought. I am reminded of a quote by Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Failure is so much a part of desire. Curiously, Miguel de Cervantes "used to say of himself that he should also be admired for what he didn't write." But Lefebvre's *The Missing Pieces,* while it is a sobering look at so much devastation and loss, is also a book that reminds us that failure is an unavoidable part of the process of creation.

So Lefebvre ends the book on a kind of hopeful note: "In 1959, Balthus asks Giacometti to give the canvas *Coffee Pot with Three Fruits* [Cafetière aux trois fruits] to a waiter named Henri, whom they both know; forty years later, the painting is mysteriously found in the Giacometti estate; Henri still hasn't been identified." The work was found. But the mystery of the person's identity remains. This reminds me of Carl Theodor Dryer's film *The Passion of Joan of Arc,* a print of which was discovered, in 1981, in a mental institution just outside Oslo, Norway. So much seems a matter of mere chance or luck. But then sometimes it works out. Something survives. And yet the reasons for this are finally mysterious. There is an air of mystery about all these works that, for one reason or another, have not come down to

us or never had a chance. Collectively, and as a result of the publication of *The Missing Pieces,* a record has been created; in a sense, the figures have been brought back to life. The unknown has been given form. A document now exists for a reader.

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4

The Perishing Things of This Perishing World

On Eugene Mirabelli's *Renato!* (McPherson & Company, 2020)

Eugene Mirabelli's series of novels reissued under the title *Renato! — The Goddess in Love with a Horse, Renato the Painter,* and *After Alba* — offer a view of the hopes and dreams, the failures and successes, the loves and losses, of generations of Italian immigrants from Sicily, who settled in Boston at the turn of the twentieth century. The central figure and narrator of the novels is Renato Stillamore, a painter, whose struggles and dreams mirror those of generations of Italians who immigrated to America. For example, Molly and Aldo: Aldo's obsession with airplanes, with the mechanics of flight, eventually comes to symbolize the dreams of escape and of a better life that many immigrants sought in the New World. During their first attempt at flight in an airplane designed by Aldo, Molly experiences a moment of transcendence:

> Then they rolled and bounced along the field with the roar of the engine, went fast and faster and sailed over the bushes

> and trees into airy space. After a while she saw she had entered a wondrous three-dimensionality, an expanding volume of light and air, and where she had lived before was gone beneath her, looking smaller and ever so flat.

Enzo Augusto Capellino, a tailor, interested in Albert Einstein's then-recent theories of space-time, decides to build a time machine. He is encouraged by the woman in his life, Lydia Chase; they are elated when they realize the machine has actually worked! They are transported 24 hours into the future. It is another one of those transcendent moments: "The world overflowed with light as every nail and rivet, every garden tool, the cast iron garden chair and even the garden itself surged toward them, all the while flaring apart, coming undone. 'Yes!' Lydia thought — or maybe she actually cried aloud — 'Yes! We're at the front edge of now and these are the raveled threads of space-time … And everything melted like a meteor into the rising dark.'" But for those who climb too high, there is always the danger that the Greeks embodied in the myth of Icarus and Daedelus. Aldo is eventually injured when flying one of his planes, and forced to land, during a mission in the first World War. But he survives. As with Renato in the later novels, this leads to his speculations about the nature of God and fate. He tells Molly, "You think the gods are logical? Oh, Molly, Molly. The gods aren't logical. They're capricious, full of passion, ambition and rage." She responds, "So are we. Does that make us godlike." Aldo then confirms that "at our best" yes, we are like gods. But you can't fool the gods for too long and death comes to everyone.

The Goddess in Love with a Horse, the first novel in the trilogy, concludes with the birth of Renato. It is not a normal birth, and conflicts with the long line of marriages and births; he is found in a laundry basket, wrapped in swaddling clothes, during a snow storm. His origin is unknown and thus the genealogical line thus far is put into question, is cut. Renato arrives unmoored in the world. He will be adopted but this sense of difference will work to somewhat alienate him from the world;

when he thinks of Avalon, the tattooed daughter of a close friend who unexpectedly arrived at Renato's Boston studio as a single mother with little boy, Kim, he reflects on their lives, "She loved her son and it had never entered her head to leave him on a snowy doorstep when he was two or three days old." Renato is a deeply flawed man but a great artist and lover; he writes: "I'm sure there's nothing in heaven more filled with innocent wonder and delight than an angel with his first erection, but it might not look that way to us fallen mortals." But this sense of confidence will be counterbalanced by feelings of regret:

> But the women I remember best were good-natured and far more patient than I, which reminds me that I want to apologize to them, finally, for my moodiness, my endless ranting about galleries, for implying that a bad time in bed was never my fault, for my sullen silences, for my throwing paints and brushes, smashing furniture, slamming doors, for destroying someone else's books or stealing cigarettes or underwear, for my waking a body at three in the morning just to talk, and a hundred other stupidities.

When we encounter Renato at seventy years old, he is a painter who has been refining his art for almost sixty years; after early successes, he now finds himself on the verge of being forgotten. He attempts to interest gallery owners in his work and is constantly frustrated. His numerous affairs with various women are his attempt to find solace and pleasure to counterbalance his sense of failure but his feelings about the nature of love are complicated: "I suppose I wasn't actually thinking deeply about these people [Alba, Zoe, his children] but picturing them for my own solace, knowing they cared for me, for if they didn't care, then everything I had done would be gone and I would be nothing, just another old man with pee on his pants. It was a while before I got to sleep." It is a statement that shows he is flawed; his sense of himself is contingent on the validation of others, and at various moments he treats both Alba, his wife, and Zoe, the mother of his daughter Astrid, unfairly. He prefers living in

his studio in Boston, while Alba lives in what he calls a "concrete mausoleum" in Cambridge. At seventy years old he left her to focus entirely on his art.

Educated at the Sorbonne, Alba is an intelligent and beautiful woman, who began writing art reviews and is a food critic, who as Renato with Avalon and Zoe, has an affair with a French chef. Renato is dependent on her for advice on how to deal with gallery owners and her opinion on what paintings to show them. They knew each other since they were teenagers and a reader feels that there is a strong bond of love between them. Zoe is less confident and still loves Renato. This makes her somewhat bitter. During a fight with him, Zoe says, "*I want to be loved most!* I want to go somewhere where I'm loved most! Is that so vain? Is that so impossible?" Alba and Zoe have different ideas about love:

> Alba believes that if you're a romantic you love only one person because the one you love is so radiant and blinding you can't even see the rest of the world, but if you're not a romantic and not blind you can be in love with two or three at once. "It happens," she says with a shrug. Zoe doesn't think so. "No, no, it's the other way around," says Zoe. "It's the romantic who tries to love more than one at a time, but it's all make-believe. Because in this world, in my world anyway, we're selfish and vain and jealous. We want to be loved and we don't want to share.

Renato's life is further complicated with the entry of Avalon in his world. Avalon is a younger, headstrong yet sensitive woman, who arrives from San Francisco with her child and seeks out Renato because he knew her father. About her Renato would finally say: "She was beautiful not like those women who are so pretty they think they don't fart, but beautiful when she was smeared with coffee dust from hauling sacks of coffee beans or when she was quietly watching Kim draw one of his maps, or when she tossed her head back and laughed or simply whenever. And she was good and true."

Renato is surrounded by many friends who are painters; about the death of one, Mike Russo, he writes, "Painters fight against invisibility and how long you live is how long the fight goes on. A year or two before Mike Russo died, he and his wife put together all their nickels and dimes to buy their first house and rebuild the attic into a studio, and in the pain of his final months the old revolutionary still dragged himself up the narrow stairway to paint because, he told me, 'The object of art is to revolt against death.'" This is a theme that will resonate throughout the second and third books, *Renato the Painter* and *After Alba*. Renato's instinct about the gallery owner Sonia Strand proves correct: "I realized morosely that she wouldn't be interested in seventy-year-old me, but this is how she behaved with the up-and-coming young pricks so eager to get into her gallery, and it had become a habit with her." According to his friend, Scanlon, also a painter, the gallery owners are only interested in what can sell. Furthermore Renato feels about the gallery owner that: "She doesn't know what she likes. Galleries don't know what they like. All they know is what they think they can't sell … Because galleries don't go broke by turning down painters, they go broke by taking on painters they can't sell." Meanwhile, the emergence of the child, Kim, Avalon's son, brings out Renato's fatherly nature; he has three grown children of his own. But Renato is essentially a dreamer, like Aldo with his airplane, and Enzo with his time machine. Aldo attempted to defy the gods, as Enzo defied the linear nature of time; Renato belongs to this group, as in his painting he is attempting to defy death, that is, to have his paintings survive in the public consciousness after his death. But Dame Fortuna can be fickle.

All the people around him know his work is good and tell him so but the art world, as everyone knows, can be cruel. Renato writes, "I've turned the pages of *ArtNews* and *Art in America* and caught myself witlessly looking for my name in the announcement of an exhibit or in a gallery review, because it's hard to believe my name can't be there one time or another, can be there ever, and that in this living world I'm invisible."

Gary Indiana writes: "It's a matter of practical fact that Stupid Art from the East Village enjoyed a wild, if brief, vogue throughout Europe for the same reason that books by horny toads like Henry Miller and Charles Bukowski are piled up near the cash registers of Italian bookshops." The market is controlled by the fashions of the day. The art world fluctuates according to these changes in the market. There was actually a time in the '80s when artists were producing work based on what collectors thought would sell. To satisfy collectors. That's selling out. And I think it's a uniquely American phenomenon that a mediocre artist can ascend in power, win prizes, and be heralded as the darling of the New York art scene. That's more about money, networks, personality. Following the game. Production of the same things over and over again instead of doing something different.

But Renato has a certain lust for life; he is hungry for love, good food, good sex, good wine, good friends, and the company of his boisterous grandchildren. He does not desire material things and has all he needs to survive; his main concern is his work and the love of his friends. About the complex nature of his feelings about this he writes: "I've loved greedily and not with perfect chastity and I don't even know why I love the people I do. I only know that I love them. Montaigne, speaking of his dead friend Etienne, could never explain the depth of their friendship, could say only that such friendship came because 'he was he and I was I.'" But the gallery owner in Cambridge, Leo Conti, believes in Renato's work, and agrees to exhibit it. Renato has his moment in the spotlight near the end of *Renato the Painter*; but the death of Alba, his beloved wife of fifty years, and the grief he experiences over this will overwhelm his life and lead to meditations on God and the nature of mortality in *After Alba*.

Eugene Mirabelli has spoken about grief. He has said it is unlike sadness or depression but rather a unique experience common to all people who have suffered the loss of a loved one. Because he is grieving, Renato questions life itself: "I don't understand why we're born or why we love or why we bring chil-

dren in the world if we and everyone we love are going to die." Renato remembers the discussions between his Uncle Nicolo, an engineer, and his Uncle Zitti, a philosopher. Uncle Nicolo would say things like: "I'm an engineer, a believer in the scientific method. Science finds out the way the world is made and how it works. The more science explains, the less mysterious the world is, and the less mysterious it is, the less we use God to explain how or why things happen. I don't see evidence of God anywhere." To which Uncle Zitti responds: "I see God everywhere I look … This world, the stars, the gravity that holds everything together — it didn't create itself. God created it." And Uncle Nicolo would respond with a question: "And who created God?" To which Renato's father would respond: "Michelangelo created God." But Renato experiences such a sense of profound loss at the death of Alba that his anger at God seems boundless: "I could not believe in the loving God and be true to Alba, so God was swept away and I stayed with Alba. Alba loved me and loved our children. God could have taken instruction from her." It is as though God retreated into the unknown after his creation and hides there to oppress mankind. It is God's absence that puts into question the meaning of the created universe and puts the burden of "representation" and explanation on humans. Thus, people are plunged into an abyss of intellectual inquiry that ends in potential darkness and confusion. Renato, overcome by grief, cannot understand how Alba no longer exists: "If she was here with me on these walks, all those times — and she was, she was — then I don't understand how she cannot be. You cannot be at one moment and then not be at the next." He begins to wonder if anything survives after death; this leads to his thinking about the nature of the soul. He learned in school that "the soul is like to God because it is a spirit that will never die, and has understanding and free will." But there are no answer to these questions; there is only the difficult acceptance of death. Alba,

> is only one, as I am only one, a drop in this ocean — one *stilla* in this *mare,* as Zitti used to say, making a play on my last

> name. This is happening to people every day, all over the world. Crying over myself came in the second year while standing in the shower, or alone at the dinner table, or climbing the weary steps to the bedroom at the end of the day.

Eventually, as they aged, both Uncle Nicolo and Uncle Zitti changed their views on politics and God, "premises and logical deductions had clearly proven weak and unreliable for both of them." They agree, that in a few years they'll be dead and none of their opinions will matter. Renato confesses his guilt and regrets as part of the grieving process: "I regret being vain, oblivious, stupid and petty, regret my rants and complaints, regret talking logic when I should have shut up and listened, regret being that me. Fortunately, Alba and I craved each other's company and, above all else, craved each other." Love is all we have to sustain us on earth.

But Renato is also curious about the nature of other worlds according to quantum physicists. His friend, George Agathos, speaking to Renato about the equations in physics that suggest the existence of different worlds, says: "It means the equations give us the right answers — don't try to interpret them, just use them." Who can know the nature of God and what happens after death? Part of Renato's grieving includes the realization that things change, are not what they once were: "The places you and I used to walk are getting erased — everything is getting erased and there'll be no memory of us walking through that field, because memories wither when you have them all by yourself." When Renato found Alba again after briefly losing her, they were in their twenties, and he was under the spell of young love and "everything was so stunningly beautiful"; but he concludes about the nature of this feeling: "Actually, it wasn't so much a belief in God as it was a surge of good feelings for the whole world, the universe, an overflow of love toward everyone, including God." Now, at eighty-three years old, he says "Everything's gone now… I believe in nothing." Gallery owner Conti — the magician, as Renato calls him — reappears in *After Alba* and works his magic, exhibiting Renato's work in his new

gallery on Newbury Street. Renato has achieved his goal to be exhibited on this street famous for its galleries. It is his second moment in the spotlight but his success is bittersweet because of his grief over Alba's death: "And when your beloved has gone, absolutely gone, you feel that half your body has been ripped away, and though you appear whole to everyone, you know you are not." No amount of success can erase the feeling of loss. One learns to cope.

Renato asks his friend, the novelist Fletcher, why "novels always come to a satisfying conclusion, no matter what's happened, no matter what dreadful things have happened along the way, there's a sense of rightness at the end? That's not the way life is." Fletcher responds: "I think that sense of rightness at the end of a story is like the resolution at the end of a piece of music … It doesn't mean everything turned out all right." Renato then says: "It just means that it's over." Mirabelli's three novels conclude with large family gatherings, whether at dinner or gallery receptions. Within this structure, the effect is cinematic: Mirabelli is adept at long shots, offering panoramic views of people, and closeups involving two or more people, usually lovers, such as Molly and Aldo walking together in the Boston Gardens at the turn of the century. The prose is economical, and the details are vivid, creating fully realized characters that a reader can understand and sympathize with. He is able to evoke atmosphere and settings with a minimum use of words. He, like Renato, is adept at creating large canvases that include generations of Italian immigrants, expressing their desires, loves, failures, and successes; yet he can also create smaller, more delicate canvases, that express the loves and desires between individual people. Finally, it is a series of books that capture so much about what it means to be mortal and to love — that is to say, to be human. As Renato said: "God made us mortal, and all we have to assuage us is this perishable art and human love."

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5

Heaven and Earth Magic

On Paola Igliori's *Red Flower Vision: An Esoteric Memoir* (Wild Embers Press, 2020)

In her memoir *Red Flower Vision,* Paola Igliori, writer, poet, filmmaker, and publisher, conveys resonances over a wide field of knowledge both esoteric and literary; the book is a kind of testament to freedom and the intellectual life, as well as a search for spiritual transformation. Her book reads like a secret history of alternative thought in music, film, and books. She tells of her friendships with diverse artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers such as Louise Bourgeois and Cy Twombly, William Burroughs and Paul Bowles, Rene Ricard and Gregory Corso, as well as the alchemist and filmmaker, Harry Smith. But it is her relationship with the writer, musician, and political activist John Trudell, and his philosophy which had the greatest impact on her life; with him she experienced intense emotions of love and intellectual insights tempered eventually by profound feelings of loss. Finally, as a publisher of Inandout Press, she has edited and released numerous books, such as *American Magus: A Modern Alchemist* (1996), on *Harry Smith; Entrails, Heads & Tails* (1992), a collection of interviews and photography on contemporary artists, such as Julian Schnabel and Vito Acconci;

Stickman (1994), on the musician and writer John Trudell; and *Chocolate Creams and Dollars* (1992), by the Moroccan storyteller Mohammed Mrabet, translated by Paul Bowles.

Throughout her life she sought out many of the great spiritual teachers of the twentieth century such as Harry Smith and John Trudell, as well as various artists, poets, and mystics, from whom she learned to transform the pain that resulted from a difficult childhood and failed marriage into a form of creative expression. In her travels she learned about their lives and philosophies, and in turn began to see herself differently, through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge, as someone who could achieve a profound understanding about herself in relation to the universe. Her experiences are both visionary and grounded in the quotidian, and aimed at transforming her suffering into art. About her experience with Trudell, she writes:

> In June 1992, when I met John Trudell at the New York American Indian Community House … it was Lightning in a dark summer night, lightening coming from the night of time. His truth beyond poetry not only had the uncanny power to activate a connection to spirit and give ears to the heart but it also instantly opened for me memories I didn't know I had.

It's experiences like these that allow her to access the deepest truths about herself. In the Sufi path, yearning and longing for the love of the Divine come to those who, in extreme pain and mental distress, can destroy and become free of the self and alive to the harmonies of creation. Through Trudell, she also meets other Native Americans and is drawn to the spirits of the natural world; eventually she becomes an activist for Native American rights, after witnessing the systematic and horrible treatment of them and the plundering of their reservations. There is a letter in the book to then-President Barack Obama, calling on him to take action against the abuses that Native Americans are facing on their land because of corporations and their unmitigated greed.

In her interview with the artist, Louise Bourgeois, she learns that another woman, like herself, experiences suffering based on childhood experiences and she learns from her that: "You wouldn't experience pain if you knew better. It's just that you are inadequate, and you try to put the blame on someone else." Igliori writes, "I envy people who don't experience this torture and who just flow and take the little things in life in stride. That you would like to be happier is obvious. Maybe all this pain enables one to get in touch with some deeper level; it's there for something." Speaking of her interviews with artists, for her book *Entrails, Heads & Tails* she writes, "[t]his forced me to overcome my deep shyness. With each of them this path unfolded intuitively, in an intimacy outside of time." In these creative moments one is infinite and free, all the heaviness of life evaporates, and all things are transformed and unified, freed of their earthbound substance to become pure light, pure understanding; it is to be free of one's separate and constraining identities. This involves the perception that,

> Artists, like children, are the most absolute in creating, materializing their own world. The small everyday things that cover the space between the person and his work chart at times in the simplest way the ground of inspiration.

For Charles Baudelaire, "it is to this profound and joyous curiosity that we must attribute the fixed, animal, ecstatic gaze of children before the NEW, whenever in the form of faces, landscapes, light." Her search for spiritual knowledge is not about avoiding the suffering of life, but rather, the transformation of that pain, integrating it in a fuller experience of the universe. It is to enter the space that existed when one was a child, to see everything as new, as a potential for creative action. It is to focus not on what decays, and fades away, subject to the ravages of time, but that which is unseen, the invisible energy that we feel more than we can explain and that connects us all to each other.

There is one human community above all else despite differences. Igliori is able to see that there is no difference between the

one and the multiple; everything is the same but also different. This knowledge allows her to go beyond the world of dualistic thinking, the Cartesian trap, to emerge with her focus intensified. She becomes one with her surroundings. This involves destroying the ego and surrendering to the creative universe:

my being

shattered

finds itself
in all

Throughout her life she takes risks, in her quest for self-knowledge, though it takes her far from the comfortable world she knew in her childhood in Italy; it is a book about going beyond the limits that society or family life imposes upon you. It is about accepting "the mysterious / terrors / and / delights" that life offers, integrating experiences so that the aura, absorbing more and more of them, turns from white to black, from the absence of color to all color. The obsidian light is diverse, both single and multiple at the same time, and radiates out into the world the divine essence of her inner being. She embraces the universe. The Empress Tarot (rules by Venus) in the Kabbalah asserts the original unity of humans as God in the dissolution of duality (microcosm/macrocosm). The Lamed is the letter that signifies the spiritual path. While reading the memoir, I thought of the following quote by the artist, Jess, which speaks to the risks that any artist needs to take to fully realize themselves: "It was the variety of existentialism that emphasized alienation, and risk, with its alternate possibilities of despair or total experience, either of which might end as total insanity, but either preferable to the rationalistic traditions which had produced such insanities of its own as wars, prejudice and little houses of death in suburbia." And so we can all find our place in the sun, where human desire and physical love, as well as the pain and suffering associated with this, are burned away. The burning represents

the heart on fire; and as this flame is refined it transforms into pure spirit. It is a healing fire that transforms one and allows them to enter another plane of existence.

This self-transformation involves the death of the old self, the old ego, and the reintegration of a new consciousness: seeing with new eyes. The sign of this stage in spiritual development is signaled by the vision of the pomegranate:

> red fruit from the dead
> the fruit of the many in the one …
> time has come for
> the red flower
> to bloom … its fruit to
> open and show its many
> shiny juicy red seeds

This pomegranate is the one fruit that Persephone brought back from the dead: "I realized the flower that turned into a fruit was a pomegranate, the fruit that, in our ancient Mediterranean Myth, Persephone brings back from the underworld, the fruit of the many and the One at the same time!" It is the "fruit of Life from the land of the Dead." It is the phoenix emerging from the ashes, or the butterfly from the chrysalis. Identity is burned in the eternal flame; then there is no difference between being and nonbeing.

Finally, one is in service to the universe, not one's ego. One's mind and body are like a talisman for the guardian angel, our higher self; we must open ourselves to be receptacles for the indwelling of the light. The universe speaks to us and we are aligned to its creative energy, not our own ego. In her life Igliori followed a path similar to the shaman or mystic; she speaks of visions and mystical experiences that intimate her next move. Her choices are informed by the demands of reality as well as the spirit world. Near the end of the book, Igliori speaks of this service to the universe, to the Elders or Secret Watchers: "I commit deeply that what remains of my life be dedicated to healing

ourselves and family dynamics (we all have them) offering what I can learn of what I have received, to help ourselves and others to heal." *Red Flower Vision* is a book that affirms the importance of community, the need for collective work as well as the need to resist those factors in the world that would repress alternative thought, in order to achieve individual and communal transformation.

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6

"Go another round"

On Red Shuttleworth's *Wolf Moon: Poems* (Blue Horse Press, 2020)

In the early 2000s, I began collecting country music, early rock 'n' roll, and gospel.[1] I remember buying those lavish boxed sets from the German company, Bear Family Records, who licensed the music from American labels. I remember thinking at the time how strange it was that all this wonderful music was not released in America. I concluded there was no market for it, at least on the East Coast. I remember listening for hours to the Carter Family, Waylon Jennings, Ernest Tubb, Bill Monroe, Tex Ritter, the Collins Kids, Dick Curless, Hank Snow, Bonnie Owens, and so many others. This was a music that talked about real life, about the pain of losing your loved one, about believing in the afterlife, in God or even the loss of faith in a beyond; while there was a religious element to the music it was also secular and talked about young love, violence, and being unfaithful: Tears will be the chaser for your wine. I remember loving the minimalism of the Bakersfield sound, listening to Buck Owens

1 An earlier version of this essay was previously published in *Talisman House* online, 2020.

and Tommy Collins as well as those great records that Bonnie Owens (who was both the wife of Buck Owens and Merle Haggard) released. There was also Harry Smith's glorious *Anthology of American Folk Music.* As I was writing this essay on Red Shuttleworth's *Wolf Moon,* all that music was playing in my mind.

Wolf Moon contains a number of photographs that accompany several of the poems. These are poems that contain echoes of the old western frontier; it is a world of dusty roads and pickup trucks, of old girlfriends, ghosts that linger under red flashing hotel signs, and Irish whiskey. One photo is of a place called Reb's Café, in Benson, Arizona. The neon sign jumps out at a viewer since most of the scene is in darkness. Shuttleworth writes, in the poem on the facing page, "A Midnight Past Christmas": "At one age or another, you might reckon there is no / key to anything. You either luck-out or get stomped / by the Devil's hooves." I can imagine the patrons of this bar, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, mulling over their lives, their past mistakes, their failures, their good times, roads taken or not, while drinking from a flask of whiskey. Another photo is of the door of a house, covered in snow, as is the surrounding area. It appears to be late at night, and the entire image is bathed in a cool blue light that is ghostly. In the poem that faces the image, "The Wolf Moon That Is," Shuttleworth evokes the ghosts that reside in us all:

> *No fucking let-up,* a voice comes to you from inside
> your shock-wavering skull. *Thought is companion.*
>
> Wet snow at the front door, dark cattle further on,
> a dwarfish pony somewhere behind the house.
> Past midnight. Soak your fist in brine. Go another
> round. The score goes in circles, without win or loss
> past midnight. Cheap cigar, moon-bright bourbon.

The speaker in the poem is going rounds with his memories which contain ghosts of the past. There's no winner and no loser in this game, just the night and the silence of the snow covered

plains. There is another photo, black and white, titled *Strippers on Break, Oklahoma City.* In the foreground is a woman, smoking. We do not see her face. In the distance, is another stripper leaning on the bar. The bar is lit up. The poem on the facing page, "The Trouble of Clean Regret" is about the memory of a woman: "Back at the end, before you start over again, you remember / her long rain-drenched hair … pastel flowers and leaves." But "there is no starting over … an old house with dirty / windows, bug-eyed ranch children never dreaming / they'll want to break away, head for stark suburbia." The problem of "clean" regret is that it involves difficult compromise with often painful memories:

> and you know she'll never lose her shine or take
> to pills or store-front alternative medicine gurus.
> Back at the end, you take turns speaking from slender
> books.

Sometimes, it is better to "slash memory": "My death-gape face in a mirror, no breath. / Okay, so sometimes it is better to slash memory." And "Shame, the residue of sorrow, is also without answers." On the facing page is a photo of Cochise County, Arizona. In the photo, we see a wide plain, with scant foliage, and the blue mountains dominating in the background.

In the poem, "No Margin for Error," Shuttleworth writes:

> The land is dead again. Boots are too tight to go six
> feet down. Snake fang. Cheap-money bus window: follow
> the smoke to torn n' crumpled Bibles. You bruised or
> haunted?

There is a sense of fatality in these poems and a kind of tough acceptance of life and death. These lines could be lyrics from a Tex Ritter song. I'm thinking of the one whose title is "Rye Whiskey":

> Jack o' Diamonds, Jack o' Diamonds and I know you of old

You've robbed my poor pockets of silver and gold
It's a whiskey, you villain, you've been my downfall
You've kicked me, you've cuffed me, but I love you for all

It's a whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey I cry
If I don't get rye whiskey, well, I think I will die
I'll eat when I'm hungry, I'll drink when I'm dry
If the hard times don't kill me, I'll lay down and die
I'll tune up my fiddle and I'll rosin my bow
I'll make myself welcome, wherever I go

Rye whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey I cry
If a tree don't fall on me, I'll live till I die.

It is a theme that runs through many country music songs: Life is so close to death. Shuttleworth talks of the "mumble-dark night," the "scent of Irish soda bread being baked," and the "winter desert." These images evoke the ghosts of a western frontier. The images are compounded of mirage and snapshot. Shuttleworth writes: "Out of bed I walk through a dream- / restaurant, waiters serving lamb chops topped / with mint jelly." Finally, he concludes: "The brain is poorly cushioned against being / rocked by punches. Nightmares … *cobblestones*." These lines are from a poem titled, "At 2:45 A.M." These are the thoughts of a man who has seen many things, experienced love and loss and the pain of being, and felt the overwhelming silence that greets one at night. He is at war with himself but it is a war he cannot win. Time is against him. Memories flood his mind, as if he is unable to control the feelings of regret and of loss.

These are eternal themes in the music of the West. It is a sound that is not valued in America any more. Americans would rather be entertained on the internet. It is a nation that only values the young. I spent years taking care of my father who was suffering from dementia. His only pleasure was watching a small black and white tv and very rarely flipping through the pages of his wedding album. I often regret not asking him many questions about his past. I used to go to a local dive bar when I

was living in New Jersey, where men stared at their drinks, or engaged in strained conversation with older women, or occasionally erupted into laughter. It was where the older, working-class people went after work and probably spent most of their wages on alcohol. I'm reminded of John Wieners's poem, "Children of the Working Class":

> Yes, life was hard for them, much more hard than for any
> blo
> ated millionaire, who still lives on
> their hard-earned monies. I feel I shall
> have to be punished for writing this,
> that the omniscient god is the rich one,
> cared little for looks, less for Art,
> still kept weekly films so close for the
> free dishes and scandal hot. Some how
> though got cheated in health and upon
> hearth. I am one of them. I am witness not to Whitman's
> vision, but instead the
> poorhouses, the mad city asylums and re-
> lief worklines. Yes, I am witness not to
> God's goodness, but his better or less scorn.

In the poem "Lump Sum," Shuttleworth remembers "so many B-movies, characters in fake-distress … A plume of smoke rose from a far- / neighbor's pasture, a grayish-green cloud … someone's yesterdays." It is a sentiment that one finds in many country songs, such as those from the Carter Family.

There is also a sense of the magical that pervades these poems, the magic behind everyday life. In "Raspy … Cheap Cologne," Shuttleworth writes, "We used to make fire on corn stubble, signals to any Gaelic goddess." In "Routine Chores and Phone Fever," Shuttleworth writes of a "curiosity about Asiatic shamans … chicken-bone readers. / What persists to the coffin: cattle at barb wire, salt n' mineral / blocks tossed from the back of a pickup, a frothy-white moon." The concern with age and

death in these poems turns to magic, old folk magic, but realizes that what will persist after death are the mundane things, "blocks tossed from the back of a pickup" and the old moon. Nature is cyclical and changeable. Man is time bound: "ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Red Shuttleworth's book, *Wolf Moon,* is essentially about memory, and the process of aging; the series of poems are visual, almost cinematic, accentuated by actual photographs for some of the poems. A reader gets the sense of the wide plains of the West, the kinds of lives that the people live there, their relation to life and death, and a certain harsh acceptance of fate. It is a world of working-class people: strippers, patrons of motels, bars, and cafes, who bargain with the night for a little more time to enjoy themselves before last call. Shuttleworth writes, in the last poem of the book, "Desert Chill": "It's taken me seventy-five years to half- / believe I have a handle on my life." Throughout the book, he evokes the voices in his head (the quote in the beginning of the book is from Revelations 16:18: *And there were voices*), all the memories, and regrets, in an attempt to fight them off. But there are no winners or losers. Just another day at the races. And, "Excess is that girl purifying her absence / with a Cowboy Junkies song … on repeat."

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7

A Sonic Alchemy

On Dhanveer Singh Brar's *Teklife, Ghettoville, Eski: The Sonic Ecologies of Black Music in the Early 21st Century* (Goldsmiths Press, 2021)

Dhanveer Singh Brar's *Teklife, Ghettoville, Eski: The Sonic Ecologies of Black Music in the Early 21st Century* provides an analysis of the various genres of Black electronic music, such as Footwork, Actress, and grime.[1] Throughout the book, Brar shows the way in which this genre has been policed and explores the numerous attempts to frame it as pathological due to the fact that its practitioners came from impoverished neighborhoods. It was music largely performed by Black people and because of this most of the musicians faced racialized policing within a context of economic and social isolation. Black electronic music was off the radar, secretive, nomadic, creative, imaginative, not bound by walls, codes, or laws. It created a rupture in the system, that produced, according to Gilles Deleuze, a "map of creative imagination, aesthetics, values … animated by unexpected eddies and surges of energy, coagulations of light, secret

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop,* 2021.

tunnels, and surprises." For this reason, Black electronic music and its producers were framed as unruly, deviant, "replete with behaviors said to offend common precepts of morality and propriety, whether by excess (as with crime, sexuality, fertility) or by default (in the case of work, thrift and family)." Often in the tracks there is rhythmic repetition. For Anthony Braxton, "The phenomenon of repetition in African music is used to establish extended Time-Space involvement. The thrust of this device moves to create a state of 'cyclic balance' that defines the terms of embellishment (or elaboration through improvisation)." For example, techno's music is essentially minimalist and contains layered electronic sounds and samples over a drum machine and a repetitive bassline.

Techno musicians, in the mid '80s, also conceived of sound as evoking interplanetary dimensions; they imagined a futuristic city, "as spatial as it is temporal." The writer, theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eschun writes in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement,* "that Cybotron's (the brainchild of Juan Atkins and Richard 3070 Davis) track, 'Techno City' (1984) is a futuropolis of the present, planned, sectioned and elevated from station to studio, transmitting from a Detroit in transition from the *industrial to the information age: Cybo*[rg] + [Elec]*tron*[ic] = Cybotron … Cybotron is the electronic cyborg, the alien at home in dislocation, excentered by tradition, happily estranged in the gaps across which electronic current jumps." It is like the big Sonic Machine coming apart, reprogrammed, hacked, to create a new language from the burned circuits of Western diatonic music. It is still idiomatic but the idiom is from a stranger land, another dimension. This rich, vivid music opens up a network of passages into other space stations of sound. There are connection points, drifting subatomic explosions of sound. Gravity is at times suspended. There are halts, a sense of weightlessness during transport. Then signals, signals to turn, enter Elsewhere. New dances form new bodies. During his life, Sun Ra would also evoke the idea of a futuristic city in space at a time when the civil rights movement was coming up against the dominant powers. Sun Ra and his Arkestra would claim in the

1974 film *Space Is the Place*: "Outer Space is a pleasant place. A place where you can be free. There's no limit to the things you can do. Your thought is free and your life is worthwhile. Space is the place." Thus, in techno there "was the ability to sonically imagine space travel and the emotive capacities of new industrial technology."

In the 2000s, the Footwork genre emerged from the techno scene and some of techno's elements can be seen in the moves of its dancers and their sense of aesthetics. Footwork is a genre characterized by fast yet precariously balanced dance steps which simulate a kind of robotic movement that is frenetic and wild; these dances took place in a space that was called the "battle circle." Each of the dancers would compete with the other inside this circle as the DJ altered the sounds, varying the music's intensity and speed, challenging the dancers and thus generating new and original dance steps, often as the dancers were in mid-step. In 2011, radio station Afropop Worldwide remarked on the Footwork genre:

> The most recent development in House's [a genre pioneered by DJs from Chicago and New York in the '80s] evolution, however, is a sound called Footwork. [To] tracks on Friday evening at the Underground Factory, teenagers face off and improvise footwork on dance battle. Their feet fly at insane speeds, something of a cross between house dance, tap dancing and breakdancing footwork. It looks like a dance from another dimension. The music they dance to is related to juke [another genre of ghetto house music in the '90s that influenced Footwork], but it's way more spacious, with more rhythmic complexity. Some tracks like "reverb" by DJ Rashad are downright experimental walls of pulsating noise that would make John Cage fall. All these styles speak to the truth that never really left Chicago house music, as is often said. Its legacy continues to reverberate and change throughout the city.

The music of Footwork is sped up, and it works its magic through a series of incredible syncopated drum patterns: flurries and clusters of kicks, snares and toms, with a splash of micro-chopped samples, either sped up or slowed down. It's the perfect soundtrack for a science fiction film about another dimension. It's like receiving sonic messages from another world. Messages in an alien tongue. And the dancers are as if hooked up to the energy of that sound circuit.

An important idea formulated by the Footwork artists is *Tek* and they identify as Ghettoteknitianz; "they declare themselves to be *Architeks,* and they conceive of their social relations as generative of *Teklife*," writes Brar. This declaration symbolizes a marking out of a lifestyle that would move away from the industrial towards the informational and the technological, towards the vast web of the digital world and computers; in their dance movements the Footwork artists embrace an aesthetics of speed. In an interview with Tevye Markson, DJ Clent responds to the question "When did the tracks start getting sped up?":

> The producer side of it is my fault. The DJ side was Traxman. He would play a Dance Mania record on 45rpm. It was fast and the dancers loved it. My idea was — instead of making the tracks slow and playing them fast, with our voices sounding like chipmunks and the bass pitched high — why not make the tracks fast? That's when it changed. It was the end of 1997.

Brar writes of the relation between dance and the envisioning of a city mirrored in the *Architekture* of the body as it moved in the battle circle: "the accompanying Pythagorean alignment of upper limbs and torso operates as a repurposing of turned over ground, to the extent that the battles start to generate choreographic designs for buildings that await realization." This is what is meant by a sonic ecology, a quality that all the musical genres described in this book share: To a greater or lesser extent all the producers of this music relate to each other and their environments, envisioning an alternative space inside their

neighborhoods, far from the financial world, and whose foundation is new kind of *Architekture*. But all this occurred during a time of unrest in the poor neighborhoods on the West and South sides of Chicago. All this activity was bound to incite the anger of those who are interested in maintaining their territories through law and order; they also attempted to repress these musicians from the outside, because internally they seemed to flourish. Alex McFadyen writes in their article on "one of America's most unique musical exports":

> The story of footwork is entwined with the experience of living in the West and South sides of Chicago and the suburbs beyond (where Rashad grew up). In the city's housing projects, besieged by poverty and generational unemployment, attacked and undermined by racist policing and corrupted politics, and coping with the effects of mind-numbing levels of violence, black communities nurtured creativity in music and art as a positive influence on the younger generations.

The electronic musician Actress, in opposition to techno and Footwork, imagines the city as a place here on earth. While wandering through the streets of South London he speaks of the various things he has seen, "zooming in on the immediacy of the environment around him." In Steve Goodman's *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear,* Actress describes his music as emerging from natural processes he observes; he speaks of "How the leaves have fallen in this formation — they're brown now, but amongst that you've still got a bit of green or whatever — and how it rests against the backdrop, and the concrete — how things have fallen. That's how I think about the music." It is these quotidian observations which he transforms into abstract sounds. In Goodman's book, Actress also speaks about his concept of the music:

> What I hear is what's occurring all the time, and that's what music is, essentially. It's sort of our surroundings, digitized

> through the human, through either a band or a computer, and probably distilled through sounds which aren't necessarily correlated to what's going on at the time, but in effect it's … it's really the same thing. It's just so abstract.

Brar writes about Actress's soundscape, that it is "rendered through the perception of, and absorption in, a range of activity in his immediate geography, which is then digitized in to sonic effects that are not photographic, but a distillation of the relations between material phenomena."

A listen to Actress's album *Ghettoville* reconfigures one's sense of what music is. The sound is enigmatic, evoking an industrial space, with rhythmic repetition and variations of the electronically modified voice, on some tracks humming or fading into the distance. It's music for mind as much as for body: the dance. It's music for What Is. I mean it shortcuts rational cognition, takes you someplace else. Sounds are not fixed but serve as points of departure for different sounds. Actress is a navigator of the sound spectrum. With two legs planted firmly on the ground the music will carry you. The sounds clear the perceptive window. It's meditative and danceable. There's a strong sense of process and flux, like a sculpture made of plasma rather than stone or bronze. Atmospheric and abstract. As the female voice repeats on "Don't," track thirteen: "Don't stop the Music." Though Actress's sound is grounded in the real world, in terms of its sonic materiality, this does not mean the music is fixed or stable, but "attentive to the minute composition of immediate environments." Actress, as opposed to Footwork and grime, operates as a soloist in part. Brar writes about him, his "quotidian observations," and his objective view of his materials:

> I feel that what makes quotidian observation a more apt formulation in this case, is that it allows for further consideration of his ability as a producer to combine an ethical refusal of the self, with a strategic disassociation which allows him to lock in on the gestural capacity of vilified social atmospheres in South London.

The intensity of revelation and Actress's consequent effacement of the self leaves in its wake the permanent invisible, the luminous, which is in the sound.

The music known as grime developed out of the earlier dance style known as UK Garage. It was "forged in the crucible of East London in approximately 2003." The music is often jagged and aggressive, with syncopated breakbeats of around 140 beats per minute. A subgenre of grime music was called eski-beat. It was the trademark sound of British rapper, songwriter, and DJ Wiley, and his Roll Deep crew from the early 2000s. The eski-beat was created by Wiley (his nickname is "Eskiboy") and it is a raw and sometime bleak sound. In an interview with music journalist, Martin Clark, Wiley says:

> I'm a winter person but the cold … sometimes I just feel cold hearted. I felt cold at that time, towards my family, towards everyone. That's why I used those names. I was going to use "North Pole" but I didn't even get that far. It was all things that were cold because that's how I was feeling. There are times when I feel warm. I am a nice person but sometimes I switch off and I'm just cold. I feel angry and cold.

Wiley grew up in Clare House, a cold, industrial, and sometimes violent area in East London. But from this bleak world, write Nico Hogg and Martin Clark in *London: Signs and Signifiers,* "small plants" can be seen "growing from the concrete rock face." In many ways that perfectly describes the genre: a vital, creative culture that, despite the odds stacked against it, grew out of the grime.

In grime, the lyrics are spoken very fast and since they are so "simple and direct, it has the effect of simplifying and abstracting the messy violence [the result of police aggression against the grime artists and also the violence contained in the lyrics] into a flow of code, boasts and bravado. There are many terms for guns, for instance, usually single syllable words that can be dropped quickly: heat, skeng, shotty, pumpy, glock, gat and so on." Derek Walmsley, analyzing MC Dizzee Rascal's improvised

lyrics on MC-producer Wiley's "Eskimo," writes, "Each line contains a sum, and if you do the math, each of those sums is a reference to a different caliber gun. 3+2+3+1 equals 9mm; 3x10+7+1 is a .38 caliber; 9+8+3+2 equals a .22 caliber. He drops all of these sums yet the whole thing rhymes. It's a brilliant piece of lyric writing — dense, fast, yet subtle." Here, Dizzee Rascal was protecting his status, his reputation against any threats; this suggestion of potential violence generated "the form, structure and contours of the lyrics." This reminds me of rapper and visual artist, Rammell Zee's comment: "A perfectly tuned war machine makes music."[2] Walmsley, in his comparison of hip-hop and grime, clarifies the nature of this violence in grime's lyrics:

> There's a recurring paradox at work here, which is that grime, by referencing violence and war so much, seems to blunt its edge. That's not to deny that events in the grime scene ever overlap with real-world violence, but violence is part of the discourse of grime to such an extent that it bears no resemblance to real-life events. MCs can be bitter rivals on record but friends in reality. Disputes and threats are generated in a sphere completely separate from any real-life dispute. They quickly take on their own logic and rules as associations and perceived slights incorporate other participants. Lyrical wars in grime spread quickly — they are chaotic, almost self-generating and more like a game of Chinese whispers than a real dispute. Allusions and references to violence in grime should never be taken at face value, but must be understood on their own terms.

The producers of grime also used pirate radio to relay the sounds; this led to improvisations over the airwaves. Because of this, they came into violent conflict with the OFCOM (Office of Communications, the government regulator of broadcasting and telecommunications). These musicians were at the "epicenter of a grime scene grappling with the contradictions

2 From an unpublished interview.

of being newly celebrated in a world whose institutions — the police, OFCOM, the legal system — were prejudiced against it." This genre of Black electronic music was considered by external forces as antagonistic, and potentially violent. For this reason, they encountered the dominant powers in the form of police violence and the attempted repression of their sounds by those in charge of broadcast regulations, both of whom saw them as a threat. Their fear was amplified since the musicians were Black. As Brar writes:

> The blackness emanating from grime-pirate radio was placing in severe jeopardy the terms and conditions of race as a spatial epistemology in London, and it was doing so by way of its carefully crafted use of violence. This is why, as a form of black music, grime induced such intense levels of racialized policing, because it represented a spectacular breach in a previously sedimented order … it manifested itself as a war machine of blackness whose primary object was its own continual flourishing … thus requiring an irrational declaration of race war on their part.

The Footwork, Actress, and grime scenes all suffered from racialized violence because of the marginalized status of their creators and fans, because they were poor and black, and their music was perceived as a profound assault on Western ideas of music and dance. Lambros Fatsis sketches the essential problem that exists even today, years after these Black electronic music movements were in their prime, in his essay on grime:

> This "incomprehensibility" of Black (British) culture [and by extension, Black American culture] is routinely blamed on stereotypes about problematic family structures, culture and values, served as a "stale dish of inner-city pathology, family breakdown, fatherlessness and chaos" (Gilroy P, "A new crime, but the same old culprits" [2003]) which also functions as a reminder of the incompatibility of "Black culture" with mainstream norms and values; often constructing "the

> black presence" as a "threat" to the "homogeneous, white, national 'we'" (Gilroy P, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* [1987]). This form of cultural racism has its roots in the belief that "Black" cultural values should be suspected of promoting violent or criminal lifestyles, and should therefore be responded to by tactics that have been described as policing against black people.

Think more generally of the recent murders of George Floyd, Sandra Bland, and Michael Brown. Think of the undocumented immigrants in the United States, and the way they are treated, where children are unfed and unbathed, where people live in coercively unsanitary spaces or rather, prisons. As long as they are not American citizens, white, naturalized, they are at risk of infection or death. They do not exist in the dominant "white" narrative; thus they are unable to mobilize effectively for mass support. It is this fear of the mobilization of these musicians that caused the authorities to act.

Finally, Brar shows that despite this aggression on the part of the police, these movements flourished in their sonic studies and activities; they developed new and original sounds, dance movements, and ways of envisioning a new kind of city. They were staking out their own territory, despite "the gloomy observations of the statisticians and civic leaders" who think they understand the so-called Black Ghetto and the sounds and community that are born there. Dhanveer Singh Brar's *Teklife, Ghettoville, Eski: The Sonic Ecologies of Black Music in the Early 21st Century* marks an important step in understanding the value of this music and how it allowed these Black electronic musicians, DJs, and MCs to prosper against all the odds.

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8

Print Is Not Dead

On *A Poetics of the Press: Interviews with Poets, Printers, & Publishers* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021)

A Poetics of the Press: Interviews with Poets, Printers, & Publishers contains sixteen interviews Kyle Schlesinger did with publishers from the United States, England, Germany, and Australia.[1] Most of the interviews were conducted in person and later transcribed, while the rest were done using the computer. The first of these interviews was with Steve Clay, the publisher of Granary Books, in 2008. Having learned so much about Clay and his publications, Schlesinger sought out other publishers to interview; the last interview from 2018 was with Annabel Lee, publisher of Vehicle Editions. Many of these publishers were also poets and printers who were interested in the visual aspect of language and the actual creation of the book as a physical object in the world. As Schlesinger writes, "*A Poetics of the Press* takes us back to the root of the word 'poetry': 'to make, create,

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2021.

compose,' or 'to pile up, build, make.' The letterpress printers and poets in this collection working with letterforms forged in hot metal understand that poetry is a material and immaterial thing." They experimented with the book's form and content, taking their cue from Robert Creeley's assertion that "form is never more than an extension of content."

Reading *A Poetics of the Press,* I kept thinking of when I decided to pursue the life of a poet: right out of college, after I graduated in 1992, and when I first published in one of those xeroxed, hand-stapled mags that were still coming out of San Francisco in the early '90s such as *Lyric&* (ed. Steve Carll), Angle (ed. Brian Lucas), *ÄnTənym* (ed. Avery E.D. Burns), and Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy's wonderful *Mirage #4 [Periodical]* (they published my first poem in 1994). Later, I published some work in softbound magazines like Lee Chapman's First Intensity, and Peter O'Leary's *LVNG* which he gave out for free. I attended many readings at the Poetry Project, and elsewhere in NYC, while commuting from New Jersey where I got my education (I graduated from Stevens Institute of Technology with a degree in Electrical Engineering in 1992).

I read everything I could get my hands on and encountered many of the books from publishers such as Rosemarie and Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck, Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press, Steve Clay's Granary Books, Annabel Lee's Vehicle Editions, Geoff Young's The Figures, and many others, including Angel Hair, whose original publication of John Wieners's *Asylum Poems* is one of my treasures. I used Spencer Selby's list of experimental magazines and their addresses to find places to send work; that's where I first happened upon *Mirage #4 [Periodical],* because the title seemed strange to me! During this time, I also collaborated with the editor of a mag I found on Selby's list: I sent some pages of artwork to John M. Bennett, publisher of *Lost & Found Times,* who wrote on them, and sent me photocopies to give out for free. These early experiences with publishers taught me about community and the possibilities for collaboration; I did eventually collaborate on a book with Kevin, many years later.

All these experiences were important for a young poet — I was 23 years old at the time, living in New Jersey and working in a bookstore — and showed me that there were poetry scenes and a sense of community throughout the United States and Europe. It led to my correspondence with Peter O'Leary, Kevin Killian, Gustaf Sobin, William Bronk, Gerrit Lansing, and others. I familiarized myself with the publishers of the mags on Selby's list and reading them taught me about the different ways a poem could exist in the world as well as certain trends in the world of poetry at that time. As Lyn Hejinian writes, "Editors and publishers contribute enormously to the shaping and substance of the literary reality of their times."

It seems we're always in a rush, never finding time to slow down. Everything we do seems to be urgent and we exist in a state of perpetual anxiety. But reading is a different of mode of experience that can slow you down. Reading is also a way to have a kind of ecstatic experience where time vanishes as we enter another world. But as literacy declines in the United States and most Americans read at levels below a sixth grader, many people are unable to experience the pleasure of reading. It's no surprise that the government wants to keep the people ignorant and glued to social media, where the constant rush of information tires one and eventually shuts down critical thought. Mary Laird, copublisher of The Perishable Press, writes, "A flat computer screen and an index of movies to watch on the TV, all those cell phones and excitements in the hurry-hurry mode … fun for a while perhaps, but not soul fulfilling. Holding that book, and daydreaming, reading in a tree or a hammock … reading at a coffee shop … these are the 'ah' experiences. Slow and enjoyable. Setting type is slow. Folding the paper is slow."

Several publishers write about the relation between setting type and its appearance on a computer screen, and point out how this fundamental operation changes one's perception of time. Alan Loney, publisher of Electio Editions, writes:

> In setting type, the time it takes for one letter to appear after another in the composing stick is a lot longer than the time it

> takes for one letter to appear after another on the computer screen. In that time anything can happen. It has something to do with slowing down, from the uninterrupted sound-flow of speech to separating words on the page to handsetting type where every letter, mark of punctuation and word-space is a separate entity.… In this sense, what is a word-space? After all, the earliest Greek writing doesn't have them, yet we tend to behave as if word-spaces are the most natural thing in the world.

The difference is between the arbitrary rules we take for granted about language and seeing words and letters in a new light. Aaron Cohick, publisher of NewLights Press speaks about when he first attempted to set his own writing in lead type: "Each word became too much of a presence, and seemed wrong.… That moment of defamiliarization continues to open, to yield new work." These experiences suggest why some poets are attracted to a printing press; this relation to words as material objects can liberate the imagination into exploring new territories of linguistic possibility, new ways of viewing language as a visual art.

It is this aspect of the visual nature of language that is important to Johanna Drucker, publisher of Druckwerk, who writes about the origin of her belief in the power of aesthetics. "This was sparked early on in creative work as well as a conviction that the visual properties of language were essential to meaning production." This concept departs from letters or words viewed as mechanistic strokes on a page and conceives of them as fluid, unstable, almost abstract shapes, with their own meaning or epistemology; this view also short-circuits the ability of language to proliferate meanings and information haphazardly as on the internet, and rather extracts meaning in the word's function as a work of art. This changes the frames of perception, slows down the reader's ability to simply interpret a text, moving their gaze from left to right, and creates an engagement with language as one would view a painting; in a sense, language now inhabits the space of the page like a painting. We can see this tendency for the visual in the work of the poet Murat Nemet-

Nejat. For him, the empty space of the page is crucial. It is a kind of force field with a strong gravitational pull, and there are points where a reader enters a space, where words seem to be in a process of forming and reforming as they are pulled apart. We are at the origin of language, prior to meaning, "at silences' threshold." The following image is from *Io's Song* (Chax Press, 2019):

ro!
or
o *r*
o *p*
o *r*!
o *r*
r
p

In this boiling luminous of language, the words are tactile, in motion, fluid, unconstrained. For Drucker, "the notion of knowledge has shifted from older, mechanistic ideas of 'things' 'known' to a probabilistic and co-dependent situation of knowing." Furthermore, Johnathan Greene writes, "In theory, poets should have a greater sensitivity to words in all realms, including how they look on a page."

The publishers, poets, printers in this book are concerned with and create objects that question the very idea of what a book is, not only in terms of the design, or font used, or color scheme, etc. but as a physical object in the world. I remember having a "copy" of Clark Coolidge's *On the Slates* published by Flockophobic Press, Ltd. in 1992. It was a shoebox that contained a leather shoe that was wrapped in tissue paper, with pages rolled in a dollar bill and tied with a shoelace; inside the bill was a poem by Coolidge and one by Rosemarie Waldrop. This "art object" was not a "book" at all and yet it contained writing. This interesting object led me back then to think, what constituted a book? Can a book, like Coolidge himself once said

about a poem, be like a rock, in that it interrupts the flow of mainstream information? I think it originally sold for around $150; I can't imagine what it's going for now, if it's even available. This kind of object demands to be looked at in a different way, not simply read, but "seen." There is also considerable wit. On the other hand, there are also publications where the pages are xeroxed and stapled together, and that over time become brittle while the pages turn yellow. The ephemeral nature of handmade things in the word becomes apparent when we think of books. I am here thinking of the Angel Hair publication of John Wieners's *Asylum Poems*. I value it for the modesty of the publication, the simple and wonderful drawing on the thick cover by George Schneeman. But holding it in my hands I need to be careful since the pages are fragile due to age. Betty Bright, in her book *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960–1980,* writes about Wallace Berman's important publication *Semina,* that it "resulted from limitations in time, money, and materials, but it also represented an ephemeral aesthetic that eschewed the slick finish of mainstream art and publishing."

In the late 1990s, with a couple of friends, I published a magazine of poetry; the poems were xeroxed, and the pages were stapled together. We published friends as well as some better known poets, such as Alice Notley, and we only published four issues. We basically xeroxed a few and gave them out to friends; a few went to bookstores and to the Poetry Project in NYC. Becoming a publisher is a way to be a part of a community, and to meet other poets. Charles Alexander, publisher of Chax Press, said:

> Part of the reason for being involved in poetry, part of the reason for starting journals, part of the reason for starting presses, part of the reason for talking to you sitting on this bench right now, is all about building something together … we share it and we build relationships and ultimately other kinds of community. In fact, I think I learned to make books partly for that, partly to enter relationships.

Which directly leads to the idea of publishing your own work using print-on-demand technology. This way the book always remains in print. Also, the quality of most print-on-demand books is relatively high. And all the poet-publishers in *A Poetics of the Press* had no problem with publishing one's own work, provided it was not the only thing a poet did. But I do think a young poet should start a magazine, print a few, and send them out. It could be modest, a few pages like *Mirage #4 [Periodical],* but it's a way to make contact with other poets and feel part of a community.

Finally, changing forms of media also play a part in the world of publishing. Given the popularity of Kindle, where one can download a whole library of books digitally and cheaply, it might seem that the physical book is going to die because of economics. One rarely sees people reading on a train or subway; they're usually gazing at their cellphone or tablet. Mainstream publishers are increasingly using ebooks as an alternative for the physical book. But the evidence in terms of sales shows that most readers will not abandon the physical sensation of touching a book for the computer screen. Furthermore, as Schlesinger writes, "these interviews address the question of how poetry comes into being and *why* — the ontology of the book." In doing so, the collection asks fundamental questions about the nature of reading and the book: What is seen? What is actually there? How is one's perception of reading changed? How does the visual aspect of language generate meaning? So as Aaron Cohick said, "Print is not dead. We are beginning to see it clearly for the first time, and now we can get to ask questions about its own structures, internally and externally. *A Poetics of the Press* shows that the love of reading and publishing books is still important to people. These publishers continue to create interesting books despite the economics involved. Dale Smith once told the publisher of Effing Press, Scott Pierce, when he was starting out, "You really want to do this, you're gonna lose money. You need to really learn how to lose money." *A Poetics of the Press: Interviews with Poets, Printers, & Publishers* is a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion surrounding this subject and is

a must-have book for any serious student, collector, librarian, visual artist, or poet.

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9

New Aesthetics of Dissident Sexualities

On *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing* by Paul B. Preciado (Semiotext(e), 2020)

Paul B. Preciado's series of short columns, originally published in the French newspaper *Libération* and other European media outlets, and collected in *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing,* contain some of the most thought-provoking and radical ideas from this leading thinker in the study of gender and sexual politics.[1] As a trans man, Preciado talks about his transition or crossing (in the sense of being borderless, migratory), from Beatriz to Paul, to a body he views as neither male nor female but existing in a space between the genders. He writes, "in this sense, these columns have at least two authors: this dissonance makes exaggeratedly visible the division of the author into a multiplicity of voices that undergo the crossing — a phenomenon that exists in any written work, but that is usually

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2020.

erased under the unicity of the author's name." It is a Pessoan gesture, where multiplicity rather than unity, fluidity rather than rigidity, desire instead of anatomically determined gender, territory instead of map, unisexuality instead of heterosexuality or homosexuality, become the strategic means of re-ordering thought to bring about a revolution that overthrows the established norms concerning gesture, language, and the body.

In *An Apartment on Uranus,* Preciado's body becomes a political analogy: "The trip to Athens, and my life there made me realize that it wasn't just me undergoing change, but that we are all plunged in a worldwide transition. Science, technology, the market, are today redrawing the limits of what is now and what will be a living human body." And this change is not only in relation to those who have been considered subhuman such as the working class, the non-white, the disabled, the immigrant, but in relation to digital technology, the machine, AI, and the "automation of the processes of production and reproduction." Preciado continues:

> The apps that can be downloaded from Facebook, Google Play or the Apple Store are the new operators of subjectivity. We should be aware of the fact that when we download an app, we don't install it simply on our mobile phone, but directly into our cognitive apparatus…the new digital disciplines set the assembly-line hand that used to write and work to masturbate the screen of cognitive capitalism.

But Preciado writes that "humanist modernity as a whole has done nothing but multiply the technologies of death." Thus the new conception of animalism should be understood as a kind of "techno-shamanism" that embraces mourning, a counter-technology that marks the end of the world as we know it.

The way we live now is a matter of speed and productivity; we have internalized the overworked production scheme at the basis of capitalism and become willing subjects. Preciado envisions a time when we will enter a new phase of the body that involves anatomy and the digital: printing "our sexual organs

with a 3D bio-printer." This is well within the conception of our medical communities in terms of its uses for the heart or the lungs, but when it comes to the "sexual organs" they invoke an ethical problem. The sexual organs seem always to be abstracted from the body, a source of shame, generating an ethical or moral problem. But it is here, precisely, that Preciado, as a trans man, locates a point of revolution. In this sense, the body becomes the site for experimentation.

He envisions a new era where biology, the digital, and language will work together to break down the "regimes of masculine hegemony and sexual difference": We can choose our sexuality rather than accept the one we were born with, and make our anatomy as monstrous as we want. It would be possible to implant a multitude of sexual organs onto the body; Preciado mentions "an eroticized ear devoted to sexo-auditory pleasure." This is a form of what he calls techno-shamanism. As Hakim Bey writes: "Lay down a map of the land; over that, set a map of political change; over that, a map of the Net, especially the counter-Net with its emphasis on clandestine information-flow and logistics." Preciado conceives this new world of the techno-animal/shaman in the following way: "A cooperation [between people] like photosynthesis. A molecular orgasm. Animalism is the wind blowing. The way the spirit of the forest of atoms still holds sway over thieves. Humans, those masked incarnations of the forest, should unmask themselves of the human and mask themselves again with the knowledge of the bees."

The epistemology of heterosexuality and homosexuality have been largely determined whereas the trans body still exists in a kind of imaginary space, without medical or legal precedent because it denies the duality that is inherent in the foundation of western philosophy, the binary sexuality that constitutes a rational indicator for the legal-medical world. Without such designation as male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, desire and sexuality cannot be said to conform with any bodily law. Preciado's body becomes the sign of a stateless, borderless, nomadic sexuality, a sexuality that is undetermined, undocumented, and unrecognized by the medical and psychiatric com-

munities. His body is a cipher, ungovernable, without identity, unrealized, unknown, invisible. The "genitally different body was declared 'monstrous,' 'unviable,' 'handicapped'; it was subjected to an array of surgical and hormonal procedures seeking to reproduce dominant masculine or feminine genital morphology," without which society is unable to enforce "the laws of sexual reproduction or political regulation." Instead, we should live by principles of complexity, singularity, intensity, and affect.

As Preciado's voice becomes deeper, as a result of using testosterone, there is a fissure in the voice, and it is as though it becomes alien. To be trans is to "speak a language that is not your own and to make it vibrate with another accent, to make your words be grammatically correct, but phonetically deviant." For Preciado, "A word is not the *representation* of a thing … learning a language in childhood induces a process of naturalization of language that makes it so that it becomes impossible for us to hear the sound of history when it resounds through our own language." The longer we use a language the less the words vibrate its history. Thus, one is unaware of the "political domination or social repetition that have forged their significations." An interesting example of this is the English word "empathy." It was borrowed, in the twentieth century, from Ancient Greek, ἐμπάθεια, *empatheia,* which literally means "passion," formed from ἐν (*en,* "in, at") and πάθος (*pathos,* "feeling"), and our use in English is the result of the word coined by Edward Bradford Titchener to translate the German word *Einfühlung*. But the word in modern Greek εμπάθεια (*empatheia*) has an opposite meaning that signifies strong negative feelings or prejudices against someone. Similarly, "Childhood, art, political activism, madness … can be envisaged as modes of intensity or perception and intervention in language." Here I am reminded of Antonin Artaud's creative use of his madness, his rupture of the French language, especially in his use of glossolalia.

Preciado talks of the real strategy for cognitive revolution that precedes actual change: "They say representation; we say experimentation. They say identity; we say multitude. They say control the poor neighborhoods; let's invent the city of hybrids.

They say debt; we say sexual cooperation and somatic interdependence." Identity politics is just the residue of colonialism, and simply another form of political subjugation. Instead we should not identify but be multiple, move out of the box of repetition, expand our strategies. As a writer, I have never been comfortable with any identification of my practice. I have translated books, written essays and poems, made films; my practice is hybrid, heterodox. Furthermore, Preciado speaks of the cognitive revolution in terms of sexuality and gender:

> To talk about sex, gender and sexuality, we have to begin with an act of epistemological rupture, a disavowal of category, a cracking of the conceptual vertebrae to allow for the premises of cognitive emancipation: we must completely abandon the language of sexual difference and sexual identity (even the language of strategic essentialism, as Spivak proposes, or nomadic subjectivity, as Rosi Braidotti proposes). Sex and sexuality now are not the essential property of the subject, but rather the product of various social, discursive technologies, political practices of controlling truth and life…. And don't bother getting out your newly-minted transcendental card: maternity as essential difference. Maternity is just one possible use of the body, among others, it's not a guarantee of sexual difference, or femininity.

For Preciado, dreams are also an "integral part of life." It is said that if we don't dream we die. He calls upon us to continue to dream of an alternate future, one where the immigrant or Muslim is not demonized, where racism does not exist nor homophobia, nor xenophobia, where men and woman and trans people have the right to exist in a free and democratic world. Preciado wants us to get away from the use of the words "heterosexual" or "homosexual" or "transsexual." These are medical terms used to codify a body in order to naturalize it so that it conforms to the legal-medical foundation for its existence in a social-political space. But the forest is ungovernable, has

no sovereign, does not distinguish between sexualities, has no politics, has no free market, doesn't know what capitalism is, or racism, or male or female. When it is mapped and defined, sectioned off as a territory through war or through the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, there is the creation of nation states, laws, customs, and the nationalistic pride of the victors, who write the history books.

Preciado's body exists in a kind of perpetual dream state, a transitional, borderless territory; he is neither male nor female, despite the sexual reassignment the legal-medical apparatus has given him. According to them, his body does not exist; it is off the radar, secretive, nomadic, creative, imaginative, not bound by walls, codes, laws. It is a singularity, a rupture in the medical system, that creates, according to Deleuze, a "map of creative imagination, aesthetics, values … animated by unexpected eddies and surges of energy, coagulations of light, secret tunnels, and surprises."

In this "new supra-state techno-patriarchal governmentality managed by the financial Mafia proliferates, experimental practices of collectivization of knowledge and production are emerging," as Preciado explores. Such an example of this in the book is the creation of the Silent University, an improvised school made up of refugees who convened in an occupied house in Exarcheia in Athens, with the philosophy that "everyone has the right to teach." The languages spoken were Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, French, Kurdish, English, Spanish, and Greek. Preciado writes:

> Thought of as an autonomous platform for exchange of knowledge between migrants, this university allows those who know something and those who want to learn it to meet, regardless of academic accreditation or institutional recognition of titles, language spoken, or processes of acquisition of residence or nationality …. By acknowledging the migrant as subject of knowledge, the Silent University seeks to activate a new global citizenship.

Here in the United States accreditation is everything, no matter how much one knows; furthermore, universities are now corporate entities who value profit over education. And we see with the various MFA programs a standardization of writing practices which enforces a kind of uniformity rather than radical difference.

Transitioning does not "designate the passage from femininity to masculinity (these two genders do not have an ontological entity, just a biopolitical and performative one) but rather the passage from one way of producing truth to another." Furthermore, Preciado writes:

> To use Althusser's terms, we could state that trans and migrant people are placed in the parodic situation of asking to be recognized as subjects by those same State apparatuses that exclude and violently threaten them. We ask to be recognized (and thus even subjected) in order to reach a social platform from which it would be able to invent new practices of freedom.

What is threatened in the present world is precisely these systems of truth, and of "political citizenship, and the technologies of the nation-state, as well as the epistemology of binary sex-gender." Think of the immigrants fleeing a country at war and seeking asylum in the United States, and the way they are treated at the border in the US under Trump, where immigrants and children are at risk of infection in unsanitary conditions. They are the marginalized, the abused, the ones who are not naturalized. They do not exist and are unable to "construct themselves as living political fictions," are unable to mobilize.

There has also been a rise in violence against trans people in recent years. Preciado realized that he had to accept reassignment as a male because without it his life was in danger. But, he writes, "First Spinoza, then Nietzsche saw the problem: we refuse to acknowledge that we are the ones who write (and act in) the script." If we accept that no one's role in life is any different from the other, and that no one is special, then there is a pos-

sibility to change the script in this "calamitous stage production" we call life. We are able to change, to alter the script, skip an act. For Preciado, "the revolution does not begin with a march in the sun, but with a hiatus, a pause, a tiny shift, a deviation in the game of improvisations and appearances." Forget social determinism or human nature or a divine plan or the neoliberal faith in the free market "as if it were a meteorological given." Following Michel Foucault, what we assume is fixed and organic about the law and human nature and sexuality is only arbitrary, the result of legal-medical choices, often invoking the divine to substantiate its claims.

In the legal-medical system as it is constituted, if one wants to live, one has to adopt and accept its codes; the medical and legal systems cannot accept the unknown, what deviates from their conception of the truth. Preciado realizes that as a trans person, becoming visible to the medical and legal world requires both a destruction of the original birth certificate, the creation of a new one, and the reassignment of his sex. Thus the trans body does not exist: "In a show of politico-scientific idealism, the doctors and judges deny the reality of my trans body in order to be able to continue to affirm the validity of the binary sexual system. And so the nation exists. And so the judges exist … And so the map exists. And so the document exists. The family exists. The law exists. The Book exists … Psychiatry exists … Even God exists. But my trans body does not exist."

The order of things is maintained by erasure, destruction, induced lack of memory, detention, and punishment. The visible, as the State, is given priority over the invisible, the silent university, the migrant, the trans person, and asserts its dominance by the use of "techniques of violence (against women, against children, against non-white men and women, against animals, against the planet as a whole)" and surveillance for example against those whose gestures and appearance are not socially accepted and are considered inferior. Remember that the Nazis destroyed modern art in order to produce images that conformed to their ideology; paintings of bucolic scenes, with healthy and strong heterosexual women and men, maintained

their idea of the all-powerful state apparatus while the *others* were being tortured and killed in concentration camps. Preciado writes, "We could say, reading Weber with Butler, that masculinity is to society what the State is to the nation: the holder and legitimate user of violence. This violence is expressed socially in the form of domination, economically in the form of privilege, sexually in the form of aggression and rape." Instead of viewing the world as unified, singular, and bounded by walls it is more imaginative and revolutionary to view it as multiple, borderless, stateless, and changeable. Because the territory is not the map.

But the fictional reality of a North and South on this map is maintained for political reasons; this reasoning is less about geography and more about seeing the North as superior and the South as inferior. Preciado writes:

> As the anti-colonialist critics Anibal Quijano, Silvia Rivera Cuscanqui, and Walter Mignolo teach us, the South does not exist. The South is a political fiction constructed by colonial prejudice. The South is an invention of modern colonial cartography: the combined effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the growth of industrial capitalism, still in quest of new territories to use for the extraction of raw material.

In the present time, the far right makes use of this invented geography and chronology, which is actually the result of colonialism, power, knowledge, and space. The argument for the far right goes like this: "The South is primitive and past. The North is progress and future. The South is the result of a racial and sexual system of social classification, a binary epistemology that opposes high and low, mind and body, head and feet, rationality and emotion, theory and practice"; the South is poor, its inhabitants are lazy, ignorant, filthy, sexually obsessed. The south "is an animal, feminine, infantile, a fag." On the other end of this spectrum, the argument goes like this: the North is "human, masculine, adult, heterosexual, white…healthier, stronger, more intelligent, cleaner. The North is the soul and the phallus. Sperm and currency. Machine and software. It's the place of memory

and profit. The North is the museum, the archive, the bank." But "at the same time, the South is the place where capitalist extraction is taking place: the place where the North captures energy, meaning, enjoyment and added value. The South is the skin and the uterus. Oil and Coffee. Meat and Gold." On the one hand, cleanness, intelligence, health, heterosexuality, the phallus, and on the other, the cesspool, the mine, the rubbish, the anus; but the South is also feared because it is the seat of revolutionary power. We must collapse these vertical distinctions which enforce a duality of inferior and superior, and hack the power grid: Imaginatively interrupt and redirect the flow of knowledge, moving through fissures and gaps, to arrive at a new language.

In "Homage to the Unknown Nanny," Preciado talks of how the definition of the social figure of the "biological-domestic mother in the nineteenth century as the sole, legitimately constitutive bond" has forced us to "erase the importance of other relationships." When the nanny is visited many years later by the child who had been in her care, she says, "My little one, you are my little one, my doll, I washed you, fed you, put you to sleep. I did everything except bring you into the world." But because in the medical and legal world reproductive rights trump all others, often these nannies who had such a crucial role in a child's early life remain unknown. Preciado writes: "The time has come to decolonize our mothers, to honor multiple, heterogenous bonds that we have constructed and that keep us alive." At times, when growing up, friends may assume more importance to a young person's intellectual and social development than one's own parents. Often, sons and daughters leave home in their teens and don't have relations with parents for numerous reasons. In sexual relationships, there are certain lovers with whom one spent only one night, and whom one remembers years later, realizing what an important influence they had. Preciado reminds us to respect and honor the multiple influences in our lives. In concluding the essay, Preciado writes that "the fiction of the stability of racial or national identity can only be constructed by eliminating the emotional and political strength

of this bastard, mixed-race filiation." He concludes: The "social body welcomes us with many arms, without which we would not be able to survive."

The essays in Preciado's *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing* (in a wonderful translation by Charlotte Mandell) outline radical strategies for coping with our chaotic times; the book challenges us to rethink the very foundation of those accepted ideas about politics, sexuality, and gender. For this reason, it should be required reading for anyone who is dissatisfied with the world as it is. And I imagine that includes many of you who are reading this essay. The story of Preciado's crossing from a feminist lesbian to a trans person provides the basis for his writing on many subjects concerning gender and sexual politics, and in doing so, he asks us to participate in the cultural revolution that is to come. This is not about "marching towards the sun" but about a cognitive revolution. This is where change begins. We must become "techno-shamans" and stretch our thinking to the farthest regions of what is thinkable. We must become nomadic navigators of the inner and outer cosmos. Preciado writes: "I have no soul and no body. I have an apartment on Uranus, which certainly places me far from most Earthlings, but not so far that you can't come to see me. Even if only in dream." This book is a ticket to that planet, one of the farthest from the earth, but it won't tell you how to get there; there are many possible roads you could take. But you'll know when you arrive. There'll be signs. And so, finally, I have to thank Preciado for taking me on that ride.

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10

The Body's Prehistories

On Hervé Guibert's *Written in Invisible Ink* (Semiotext(e), 2020)

One of the many pleasures of reading Hervé Guibert's collection of stories, *Written in Invisible Ink,* is following his development as a writer from the earliest stories in this volume, which date from the late 1970s, to the latest, which were collected in 1988's *Mauve Virgin*.[1] According to his widow Christine Guibert, he did not write any stories after 1988 and focused more on longer works such as the novel *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990). Several of the stories published in this present volume have never been published before. Interestingly, the ones collected here, chosen by the translator Jeffrey Zuckerman, coincide with Guibert's time as a journalist; many of the texts have the journalist's attention for details that will capture a reader's attention.

The stylistic difference between the earliest of these books, *Propaganda Death,* and the later stories is between the raw, passionate writing of the former and the more controlled prose of the latter. Guibert was one of the first French writers of "autofic-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *boundary 2,* 2020.

tion": He used writing from his diary as well as memoir and fiction to complicate the narrative "I." The writing in *Propaganda Death* is almost cinematic in its cataloguing of physical violence to the body mixed with an unbridled sexual urge: "My body, due to the effects of lust and pain, has entered a state of theatricality, of climax, that I would like to reproduce in any manner possible: by photo, by video, by audio recording." Its scenes of the savage torturing and disemboweling of the human body, amidst slaughterhouses and hospitals, exhibit the frightening transparency of what lies beneath the skin, revealing its secrets: "no need for candles to brighten this night of the body; its internal transparency illuminates all." In "Final Outrages" Guibert imagines himself as the young girl Ophelia, "stolen away in the bloom of youth by an ailment gnawing slowly at her interior (while making her exterior radiate!)." In "Five Marble Tables," he writes, imagining himself dead: "I won't let go of my body, I cling to it, I push out everything I can inside but it all stops immediately, I'm clean forever now, my muscles tear apart, I can't go back in myself anymore and I leave this deserted place, all the fight gone, all the fury slain." Death in life is imagined as transformative. In *Crazy for Vincent,* published in 1989, a year after the latest stories in this volume, Guibert writes: "I struggle with the mystery of the violence of this love … and I tell myself that I would like to describe it with the solemnity of the sacred, as if it were one of the great religious mysteries … I don't have too many sexual thoughts, of fucking or of defilement, violent hallucinations that would bring sex or lechery into play, but rather the suspended grace of bearing witness to a transfiguration" (Guibert 2017). The thrust of these stories is away from materiality, and towards a refiguring of the male body as a site for spiritual transformation.

Propaganda Death is also an ecstatic fantasy of destruction, desecration, and horror, calling for nothing less than the annihilation of the petit bourgeois world through a complete reversal of their cherished mores and customs and their obsession with good hygiene, both physical and mental: "I'd like to smear my gonorrhea over the entire world, infect the planet, contaminate

dozens of asses at a go, … my bed every morning is a field of carnage, a slaughterhouse." He continues: "Let's open abscesses in all this stupid flesh! … Let's love ourselves and hate them! Let's orgasm as we pull our heads from our bodies!" Wayne Koestenbaum writes:

> Filth is Guibert's passport to infinity. Filth, as literary terrain, belongs to de Sade, but Guibert reroutes s/m through the pastoral landscape of religious interiority, as if ghosted by hungry Simone Weil, or by Wilde's scarified, Christological denouement. (To skeptics, such spirituality might seem papier-mâché, but I'm a believer.) Guibert sees a cute young man at a party and "instead of imagining his sex or his torso or the taste of his tongue, in spite of myself it's his excrement I see, inside his intestines." (Koestenbaum 2014)

These passionate, anarchic early texts are difficult to read. They are unpolished, raw, unedited, obsessed with the violence of desire, and with orifices; but nevertheless, they are works of great intensity, written when Guibert was twenty-one years old, and likely to shock a reader into a recognition of their own body, its impermanence, and the weakness of the flesh. They are performance, spectacle, and indeed, propaganda in defense of homosexuality and the violence of desire.

Guibert seeks to "to uncover my body's prehistories," the traces of the animal inside the human. In the story, "Flash Paper," he writes that while kissing Fernand, he imagines that "Out of the extended, warm pleasure of the kiss came other visions: we were two animals that had met on the terreplein, each from our own half of the forest, two horned beasts, two giant snails, two unhappy hermaphrodites." And, continuing with this theme in the same story: "His wide-opened eye had awakened mine and did not leave it: we had become insects." He and Fernand are, "two poor shameful animals." Finally, he writes: "we danced like two spider crabs being boiled, destroying everything in their path." The erotic charge of an encounter turns men into animals searching for their release. There is danger and excitement in

the kill, the sexual energy of it: "If I fuck him, if I decide to fuck him, it's first to annihilate him." This is "no simple sadism… no simple equation of fucking and killing, of penetrating and violating—instead, the wish to fuck or be fucked…is a sensation of being voided, chiseled, scalded, disemboweled. Is this consciousness a queer privilege? Is it shamanistic? Is it in fact not trans or queer or anything of the sort, but simply poetic?" (Koestenbaum 2014). Guibert could certainly be melodramatic, as well as poetic. Sex in his work is theatrical; he plays a game of hide and seek with a reader. But he doesn't sugarcoat desires that are complex or grotesque and this is what makes his work so valuable as a document of honest writing in a time such as ours when the line between truth and falsity has been blurred.

In the section, "Personal Effects" Guibert examines objects rather than bodies and reveals their hidden meanings or forbidden histories. About the cat-o'-nine-tails, for instance, he writes: "The cat o' nine tails has been hung, among the cobwebs dusters, from ceiling hooks, in the dim backroom of the hardware store. It carries within itself, in its unmoving straps, the screams of battered children, it exhales the pleasure of perverted lovers." Gloves are a normal part of winter wear or when working in the garden, or in construction, et cetera, but Guibert reminds us that, "it should never be forgotten that the hands they're keenest to help are those of thieves and stranglers." With regard to the "vibrating chair," he notes that the dukes of Pomerania found "extravagant" uses for it, including attaching a large dildo to its seat. This section of the book is representative of Guibert's poetics. As a journalist, he was accustomed to examining the forbidden histories behind things which elude the eye of the observer. In "Newspaper Clipping," he talks about certain facts concerning the death of a person and cautions about imaginatively reconstructing the scene. "Let's come back to reality!" he writes, concluding that, "everything, for now, remains purely hypothetical." The secret will not reveal itself easily and it requires patience and research to reveal a truth perhaps stranger than fiction.

In the world of these stories, love is essentially a complex power game, where the weak person is always at a disadvantage.

Guibert is not a psychological writer, concerned with exploring in depth the subjective feelings of lovers. There is no utopian idea about love in these stories. Love is often deceptive, leading to betrayals and even violence. "For P. Dedication in Invisible Ink," concerns a young writer who has complex desires towards an older, more established writer, and is called upon to help him write a book. At the end of the story, the young writer speaks of their erotic dynamic in the following way:

> The king of the jungle had been tamed, or maybe it was the lion that subdued its tamer, but one or the other, at his point of submission, attacked the other in hopes of breaking him, and these visits grew increasingly rare. The break-up happened over the course of the seventh year, bit by bit, as if by blows, and neither the assailant nor the stronghold, at risk of breaking their necks, wanted to bow down.

Love often begins with a kind of "tacit contract" that one or the other eventually betrays. In one of the central stories, "The Sting of Love," love is imagined as a liquid that is injected in the lover. The story traces its various effects on those who have been "infected" and concludes:

> A happiness so great becomes unbearable unless one is shackled, or better yet, in bed, because the effect of this injected liquid doesn't end with any climax, it persists all the way into sleep. It is impossible here to determine the specific link between consciousness and dreams. Anyone who wants to fight against this surreptitious transition with conscious effort, who is afraid because the dream, at first still just as wholly gentle, slowly turns into nightmare, flickering with swift animal shapes, anyone who wants to prolong this amorous stupor indefinitely with a second injection is struck with melancholy, as with a tarantula's bite, and loses speech, nails, job.

Physical attraction is just as capricious and mysterious and not necessarily the result of erotic language: "We sat facing each other in the small, unlit kitchen, and I immediately felt within his physical presence a sense of elevation, adventure, freedom. The words he had said had nothing overtly erotic about them, but they suddenly, mysteriously had my penis swelling." There is no attempt to seek a reason for his desire which would amount to a kind of defense; Guibert was open about his homosexuality and its relation to danger as well as pleasure. Furthermore, this physical excitement can suddenly turn into potential violence: "two years earlier, walking behind him, I had suddenly wanted to use all my force to hit the back of his neck with the heft of the camera hanging by a strap around my wrist." In "For P. Dedication in Invisible Ink," Guibert writes, "My feelings about this man were skewed: even as I could have said that I loved him, when I found myself before him, at long last, I wanted to go for his throat."

Danger extends to sexual encounters in the park. In "A Lover's Brief Journal," Guibert relates an incident in the Tuileries, where, after "a guy whispers the word cop," he and another man get dressed, and leave the park. But Guibert is then assaulted: "the first one punches me in the face, another kicks me in the balls, right after a third guy takes a running start to headbutt me, I fall down, I get back up, I shout for help without thinking about it, they run off, I run in the other direction, I turn around, I see one of them hurrying to pick up the coins that fell out of my pocket, hungry, greedy." The violence has as much to do with money as with sexuality: the link here is between capitalist greed and homophobia. Though capitalism created the material conditions so that both men and women could lead independent sexual lives, it also, at the same time, imposed heterosexual norms on society to create an economic, ideological, and sexual regime, centered in the family. In the present time, when Trump, a symbol of capitalist greed, is seen as a spokesman for the white, heterosexual male, and encourages violence against marginalized groups on the basis of their skin color, religion, or

sexual preference, it is no surprise that we see a rise in violence against gay, trans, and queer people.

For the narrator of "Flash Paper," love is, "a voluntary obsession, an unsure decision." But Guibert writes of the man who died in "A Man's Secrets," "All the strongholds had collapsed, except for the one protecting love: it left an unchangeable smile on his lips, when exhaustion closed his eyes." And the aging star in "The Desire to Imitate" says, "In this impossibility of love there will have been all the same a little love." In these stories, love and cruelty are woven together. This unholy union was born of Guibert's hatred of his own body, his self-pity, his anger, his theatricality, his passion for the grotesque. He is attacking bourgeois values, and inherited ideas about morality, thus turning our assumptions about love and hate upside down. Men who knew him said he was cruel but he hated pity and charity. Marie Darrieussecq writes that he preferred real friendship and despised cowardly people (Darrieussecq 2015). For Guibert, true love may be impossible, but all the same, he valued the love that was possible in genuine friendships. He sought the truth in himself by testing the limits of his body and desires. In a world where our freedoms are being assaulted by both far right conservatives and neoliberals, a writer like Guibert is necessary and should be read, because he questions our conventional ideas about the nature of sexuality, love, and hate.

Death hovers on the periphery of the stories in *Written in Invisible Ink,* and is often a central theme, linked mysteriously with desire. In "Five Marble Tables," Guibert imagines himself on a laboratory table, communing with other bodies, one of which is a young child. As I suggested earlier, in the story Guibert feels in some way liberated: "I'm clean forever." Guibert speaks of the dream, a kind of death state in itself, as concealing, "a geography of pleasure, an itinerary with its impasses, its openings, its stairwells, its gulfs, its forbidden directions. Desire is there alone, idealized, freed of all materiality." It can also contain, "desirable monsters," such as the man whose "suffering was immense" because his "head is four times larger than his body" and who believes the hand that gives him his food through a

trapdoor is the hand of God. The monstrous, the forbidden, is a gateway to the spiritual.

In this palace of desirable monsters are men with "dog's or wolf's heads" or with "scales or moss growing on their skin." The animal and the vegetal are mixed and the monstrous appears beautiful. A world based on reason, a human creation, gives over to the animal, the irrational, the monstrous. This space contains an alternate time that exists simultaneously with the real world. In "Posthumous Novel," one of my favorite stories, Guibert writes of a space where, as a result of a "deatomization effort" in Holland, "countless words, incomplete sentences" are "hanging like clumps off of trees and, broken and sown over the ground." Words are not necessarily attached to sentences but exist alone as fragments. In the story, Guibert writes that when one is travelling by train, one's thoughts release, "more or less clouded and blinded" words into the air of the surrounding countryside and that they take root in the "roadside dust, a branch shaken by the wind, setting sun." These words or sentences, cast into the world by the living, are "nourishment for the dead…a vital message of what happens in the hereafter." By accessing these "sentences" through "x-raying" the "final trajectories" of the young writer in the story who committed suicide, the author is able to partly reconstruct the dead man's novel. The narrator is like Orpheus, in Jean Cocteau's film, listening to the transmissions on the radio which are actually the voices of the dead. These words of the dead need to be remembered. History must be remembered in order not to repeat the same mistakes to the point of unconsciousness.

It is in this forbidden space, this underworld that does not obey the laws of physics, that Guibert, a kind of Orphic figure, is able to imagine a language that is not bound to its materiality: It exists in the air, unrealized, incipient, spiritual, the image of a ghost. It is here where the monstrous, the aborted, the abject thoughts reside, and where the dead dwell. It is a land that "had never been described or transcribed on a map." It is a forbidden and magical place, where one has the "courage to be oneself, to present oneself, and to liberate every secret, to invent them."

Guibert wrote this book in "invisible ink," from that place, as if the stories themselves are only the visible traces of what lies behind them: the sexual encounters that produced them.

In January 1988, Guibert was diagnosed with AIDS. As a result, he immediately found himself the focus of media attention and appeared on numerous talk shows. Early in his career, Guibert was openly gay and unashamed of his homosexuality and this, according to his translator Jeffrey Zuckerman, "was not meant as a provocation" but as "a quietly revolutionary stance in line with his particular brand of rebelliousness, in which, to quote a line from the end of 'Ghost Image,' 'secrets have to circulate.'" Furthermore, Zuckerman writes, "When I began this project, all of Guibert's translated novels were out of print—even *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life.* At the time, it felt symbolic yet saddening: if gay rights were moving so steadily forward toward equality with the broader population, why preserve this particular, liminal past? Indeed, such an unprecedented nationwide—and even global—sea change in attitudes toward gay marriage and adoption risked effacing the long struggle that came before it, from Oscar Wilde's trials and Alan Turing's cyanide-laced apple to the Stonewall riots and the ACT-UP movement" (Zuckerman 2020). And for this reason, the stories in *Written in Invisible Ink* are a valuable addition to Guibert's work in English, and a good starting point for the reader unfamiliar with his work.

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11

A Philosophy of the Bedroom

On Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The Freezer Door* (Semiotext(e), 2020)

I remember late at night before "last call" (this was the '90s), when everyone would fill the dance floor, and I'd see all those arms and faces and legs, all together forming a colorful mass of sweating flesh, in which I joined eventually, all of us in unison silently hoping the night would never end.[1] We were working class kids, seeking experiences in the night, sexual or otherwise, that might make the day more bearable. Sure, in some ways it was a fool's game. But that didn't matter. It was solidarity in the night, the "I" became "we," the singular, plural, on the dance floor. If only the energy of these bodies could be harnessed for political purposes. It's during the day, when we're at work, that we feel separate from each other; at night, we shed that lonely façade, and squirm in unison until dawn. Then there is the morning after. I remember walking the streets of New York after a night out in the clubs, and watching the sun come up over the rooftops; everything seemed pale or rather, a pastel color. Then later, when I got home, I would spend hours listening to music

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop*, 2021.

on my headphones, unable to sleep. We had been released into the bright light of the world. Often, my friends and I would go out in the middle of the week, and appear the next day at work, half asleep, drinking multiple cups of coffee. The night then seemed like a dream.

Reading Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The Freezer Door,* I was initially reminded of all the clubs I went to in the late '80s, early '90s, and all the records I listened to: new wave, soul, house. The prose has the same intense energy of all that music. I can feel the sweat, the lights burning my skin, the dizzy feeling that overcomes you when you're out of control and moving to the beat; you're rubbing against the skin of strangers, thinking about love, everyone is alive, and you're caught up in the swirl of the sounds and the lights. Sycamore writes: "But then there's dancing. The way my body can spread out into the whole room. No, it's not my body, it's joy. This joy through music. This joy through the music in my body, my body in the room the room in my body and flying, that's what it feels like, if flying is my body giving way."

But it's also a book about loneliness and alienation and about looking for love in all the wrong places. It's about the search for sexual release and belonging, about relationships that have the possibility of lasting, and the eventual letdown caused by a sense of not being accepted, even in the gay community. It's about the problem of representation:

> The meanings of queer and trans are constantly shifting — this is part of the allure. At once identities that declare an end to borders, and identities that constantly build walls, challenging enough to derail conversations and at the same time empty enough to use in the name of a TV show or nonprofit. One problem with the politics of representation is that often it's about who is represented, but not what.

The gay world has betrayed those who sought its acceptance. It has adopted the structures and attitudes of the straight world; gays can marry, adopt children, and live in gated, largely white,

communities: "It's obvious that a gated community is a graveyard. A graveyard has gates, to protect the dead from the living." There is no danger, no fuel to start any fire in the body, in the heart. No chance for a queen to find love in such a closed off, hierarchical, and militaristic world. Trump wanted to build a wall at the border; the rich want fences around their houses. For Sycamore, "the dream of urban living has always meant a density of experience, that random moment on the street that changes you." She continues: "But now, when people say increasing the density, they mean building more luxury housing for new arrivals who only want an urban lifestyle with a walled-off suburban mentality — keep away difference, avoid unplanned interaction, don't talk to anyone on the street because this might be dangerous."

Men who are faggots and queens and sissies are marginalized in gay culture and are often those who face the most violence and abuse. The gay world wants to be more masculine than the straight world. You know, like trans people wanting to join the military (as Sycamore noted in an interview). The result of this kind of thinking is that cops appear nicer than gardeners: "There's too much overlap between cops and gay men, I mean this in every way possible." That thought is frightening. Paul B. Preciado writes, in *An Apartment on Uranus*: "We could say, reading Weber with Butler, that masculinity is to society what the State is to the nation: the holder and legitimate user of violence. This violence is expressed socially in the form of domination, economically in the form of privilege, sexually in the form of aggression and rape." Sycamore is against this obsession with a militaristic mindset and all it suggests about power, the desire to dominate others, to colonize others, and to repress difference. In *Reverse Cowgirl,* McKenzie Wark writes about that symbol of masculinity in gay culture, the clone, that was popular during the '70s, and in doing so, exposes the problem of masculinity:

> If straight men imagined they were above the women they fucked, then the clones would be above those men by fucking other men instead. On the logic that if you fuck it then you

> are above the thing fucked. Fucking men who were femme does not fulfill this feat of the overman. As everybody supposedly knows, us faggots are even less than women. Plenty of straight women would agree, and sad to say so too would some lesbians. The non-straight world was not free of its obsessive ranking and sorting. It was not communism. I wanted to destroy all of this.

Sycamore realizes it's hard to get out of this mindset. But she writes, "masculinity can be a language too if we get rid of the language it owns. If we get rid of everything but my lips around his dick a craving. Just the way I stand up, and we're finally making out. Just the way I'm holding his head and maybe masculinity can be pure." Sycamore's thinking is open and allows for possibilities; she is working to dismantle the system inside the system, and is not above challenging her own ideas if they seem to be settled or fixed. She has said she writes so as to not die. This gives the writing an urgency and fearlessness that is missing in so much contemporary "literature."

Sycamore is critical of the dominant narratives that erase marginal histories; she imagines a different world, where "we would have more options." The economic and social structures that exist now are clearly failing us. The neoliberal agenda is in league with the Right and as they're fucking each other in bed and fucking over the people, the dildo they use has the word capitalism written on it. African Americans, queens, immigrants and the poor have no place in that structure. They are not faithfully represented by the white, wealthy world of politicians. Big money rules and influences opinion. Not the people. Not queens. Sycamore writes:

> And the dominant narrative is always a form of erasure. How many people hide the scars, literal and figurative, in order to conform to what's supposed to be? Yes, we live in a far different world than the one where an HIV diagnosis meant imminent death, but we also live in a world where public demand for a cure is nearly nonexistent.

Furthermore, she writes, "People who talk about being on the wrong side of history like that's a bad thing must not have read a lot of history." When FDR passed the New Deal, there was a viable communist party in the country. Nevertheless, in the end he also saved capitalism. But no president can be trusted to care for the people. Trump is a glaring example of this. Sycamore wonders whether presidents are needed at all.

She ruminates on the nature of control, and how certain transgressive voices are silenced in the name of objectivity: "The disappearance of voice in service of objectivity or science or literature, a fully-made bed as the symbol of righteous indignation I mean proper décor. The worst response is no response. Whenever I hear about helping people out of the shadows, I wonder about helping people to stay in the shadows if they want to." I'm reminded of how academic essays are supposed to be objective, obeying a kind of scientific method. The subjective has no part in this. Rub yourself out. You don't belong there. A queen having sexual experiences in public parks, being a hooker, or acting in porn, is repugnant to the upper-middle-class gay world where masculinity rules, where the corporate mindset is all that matters. No wonder women are consistently underpaid for doing the same work as men.

It is difficult to imagine a different world: "Unfortunately most people only believe in two kinds of history — the history that never was, and the history that will never be …. Sometimes the violence of people allegedly trying to help is the worst kind of violence." The world is now largely a collection of images, data points, saved messages, and selfies on a computer screen or iPhone: surface effects without substance, and thus not subject to duration. Sycamore writes about the nature of communication in the world of the iPhone in the chapter "I Hate Technology":

> It makes sense to me that people who grew up texting might be skittish about talking on the phone, but then there are people older than me who will say they've always been

> afraid. And maybe that's true. I just wish people had stopped talking on the phone in order to see one another more often, but unfortunately it's just to never see one again.

This present world with its structural problems, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia is a world where love and true intimacy seem impossible. There is a kind of existential fear that consumes people these days. Sycamore begins the book by saying, "I remember when faggots kissed hello." They used to, when it was more dangerous to do so. What has all this safety done except make us more afraid to express ourselves. Because safety equals borders, clean streets, the status quo, the erasure of difference. The extreme polarization we are witnessing today seems to be a symptom of what is happening in personal relationships. There is a lack of connection. We fear one another. How can love survive in such a world?

We are fed stories about a mythical golden age to keep us ignorant of our present realities. Sycamore writes against this kind of nostalgia which is a form of violence. In recent years we have seen the publication of various books on the '70s by people like Patti Smith, or Duncan Hannah, who perpetuate this kind of myth. Sycamore writes, "Patti Smith feeds us the same tired mythology about fame as a chain of coincidences, the one that says you can just go to the Chelsea Hotel with five cents in your pocket, and then suddenly you're a star. She feeds us that nostalgia for the glory days of a New York that never existed, the one where you fuck some guy who just stole a steak and it turns out to be Sam Shepard." What about all those artists and musicians and poets who didn't make it big, who overdosed on drugs, or disappeared from the scene? These books give a false view of the past. But Sycamore sees that this kind of thinking about the past, though nostalgic and false, must be dealt with in order to imagine a world of new possibilities; otherwise we repeat the mistakes of the past to the point of unconsciousness.

Loneliness and alienation disappear, or there is a possibility of intimacy and belonging, during sex, in a club, in a park, or in porn. About her sexual experiences, she writes, "Maybe this isn't

what I thought I was looking for, how to get fucked by random people in a softer way, but still it feels beautiful. It feels like there can be light in these dark rooms, a lightness in my body, and maybe I can bring this into other rooms." She is hopeful. Sometimes, she experiences intimacy, fun, a connection, and a loss of the self in other, less complex ways:

> Let's play, I say, let's play, and then I'm doing that thing where I kind of hum like a little kid, I mean it's a laugh no not a laugh but a gentle sound of pleasure that means I'm here, all of me, and that's why Adrian is kind of laughing when we're kicking pinecones, I mean he kicks a pinecone to me because he knows I love kicking them, and then there's that humming like I'm a little kid, and I'm free. Finally free. I'm free.

But these feelings don't last and her sexual experiences are discontinuous. The result of this is a feeling of loneliness: "everyone keeps letting me down. This is my romantic life, my romantic life right now. I want this story to have an ending, but I also want it to have a different ending." The world seems strange when you're alone. She ruminates on how, in the clubs, you feel a connection when you're drunk but then that's not really a connection. This is what it means "to celebrate." But the resulting desire and disgust produce self-hatred. Sycamore wonders: "Is this just true for faggots, or for everyone? How a universal experience is universally impossible."

The book is concerned with the problem of assimilation and gentrification. To resist the status quo is to be unique and to preserve yourself; since we were children, we've always been taught to work together, to form a group, where there is an eventual leader. This is how you first learn about the hierarchy. And of course the person who is different is not allowed to maintain their identity. It must be erased in favor of the group identity. No difference will be allowed in a classroom. In the following excerpt Sycamore speaks of the dream of being queer in such a society; it seems that this dream falls into the same structural trap as any other, with its own hierarchies:

> How do you unwind the damage, when you're still so damaged? Maybe I still don't know the answer. Maybe the dream of queer is just another consumer mirage. Maybe we need to bury the dream in order to imagine something else. But how do you bury a dream, without burying yourself?

The problem is language. Standardized language is the language of the dictator, the colonialist, and of literature. In *The Freezer Door,* language is freer, uninhibited, intimate, non-linear, and anti-literary. Hearing Sycamore read is to see the language come alive from the page. After I heard her reading, I realized how conversational the language is. There is an intimate bond created with the reader. The language is vibrant, pulsating, and provocative. It is thought embodied in language; it is as if the reader is experiencing the birth of her thought as it happens on the page, like when you're talking to someone, say, in an after-hours place, or at home, after a night out in the clubs.

Towards the end of the book, Sycamore writes, "When I was a kid, adults would lean down to say: You're so idealistic. Like this was only something a child could be — you'll grow out of it, they told me. The problem is that most people do." This is so true. I think about how teenagers often keep journals, think about love, and about their feelings, and are inclined to write and read poetry. This is the idealism of those years. Often, these same people go to college, to study business or computer programming, and forget about that idealistic world in the pursuit of profit, as they marry and have children. This is the script. And it's so ingrained in one's mind that few are able to fight it. If you step out of this structure, you face persecution, abuse, poverty; the world becomes dangerous and your life precarious. Sycamore found that there was even persecution in the gay world, in alternative spaces. It seems like there is no way out of this structure. I don't have an MFA, and I turned my back on my engineering background to pursue life as a writer, at times facing homelessness, violence, and the incomprehension of others. Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The Freezer Door* is an important book because it challenges our assumptions about the world,

and in doing so, gives us hope that an alternative might be possible. When reading her book, I can almost see it before my eyes; I know that world is in front of me all the time, just on the edge of visibility. It's books like these that ultimately help us to see clearly.

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12

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

On Derek McCormack's *Castle Faggot* (Semiotext(e), 2020)

Derek McCormack's *Castle Faggot* is a kind of deranged children's book, where everything is upside down, or in reverse, counterclockwise.[1] There are magical dollhouses and bizarre characters who are puppets or ghosts, and the author also makes an appearance in the book! The central dilemma concerns the making of a magic mirror for Count Choc-o-log, a vampire; John Dee (the wizard, who is, by the way, the author) is forced to do the job. McCormack's language contains puns and neologisms; he also has fun with the names of famous nineteenth-century poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, who becomes Marshmallarmé in the book. He is the one who gives the wizard a magic tome that might aid him in making the mirror. For Jean Cocteau, mirrors are gateways to the underworld, to an encounter with Princess Death. For Jack Spicer, a mirror is not something you look into, but it is something you project outward as the poem, in order to catch the reflection of a lover, to whom the poem is addressed. Its goal is to capture or rather seduce.

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Tripwire,* 2020.

But, as we will see, it is also possible to ensnare a demon lover in a mirror. In *Castle Faggot,* nothing is as it seems; it is a magical world, and as every child knowns, in such a world nothing happens by chance.

Count Choc-o-log desires a mirror in which he can view himself, his beautiful self. But making a magic mirror involves some serious magic! So a wizard is brought onto the scene; he's the author of the book! In fact, hearing the author's name, the Count christens him John Dee, the famous magician, and, against his protestations, demands that he make a magic mirror for him. He threatens to eat him up if he doesn't, like a big bowl of cereal, preferably Count Chocula, of course. The wizard feels that he is moved by invisible strings (in magic nothing occurs by chance): "I shake because I'm scared, and because a puppeteer's making me shake." Cocoa Chanel, Chollette, and Antoine, the hairdressers, do not want the Count to have a mirror in which to view himself. After all, their profit is based on his visiting the salon. With a mirror, he can take care of himself. He can buy his own beauty products with the extra money, presumably. The Count is a vampire and so it seems futile to make a mirror for him, since, of course, vampires cannot see their reflection in a mirror. This is because it was thought that mirrors reflected one's soul and vampires have no soul. But if you're beautiful and perfect like the Count what does it matter if you have a soul or not! In this magical world anything can happen and often does!

Franken-Fudge tells the Count he doesn't need a mirror. Boo-Brownie agrees. The Count will not be swayed, and responds in anger: "How can I see how fucking perfect I am?" He needs a mirror and fast! He continues: "What would you know-nothings know about it?" and says, "Ghosts can see themselves in mirrors — even though they're see-through! Monsters can see themselves — even though they're unsightly!" At one point, the Count begins to sing a song that is haunted by tunes from the *Wizard of Oz* to express his desires. Did I mention this is a very musical book? First the Count sings, "Oh, me!, I'd like to see my l'image inversee. I'd look at myself and never look away. I'd look

and look and look all day!" And then, unlike the Scarecrow or the Tinman, he doesn't desire a brain or a heart but:

> If I had a magic *miroir,*
> I'd slip into a *peignoir,* or something else that's sheer
> A la Marie Antoinette, I'd see myself in my toilette,
> If I only had a mirror.

Boo-Brownie and Franken-Fudge tell him he could rely on his friends to tell him how perfect he is. But this will not do. The Count wants to see his perfect form reflected. He is Narcissus. But will he die? No, because he's dead already.

In Castle Faggot all the faggots are dead. They serve as décor in the castle, and the main characters are puppets, and ghosts as well. According to the wizard, they may not even be real. Marshmallarmé says the following about puppets: "I'm Marshmallarmé, Stephane Marshmallarmé, a puppet and a poet, a poet and a puppet—*poupoeté*! You're a puppet, too." *Poupoeté* is a neologism formed by combining *poupée* (puppet) and *poète* (poet). Just like a puppet receiving messages from East Mars! Marshmallarmé fills the wizard in on the various characters: "Boo-Brownie's a ghost in a blue shirt. He's the ghost of a blue shirt. What size shirt does a spiritualist wear? Medium. Cocoa Chanel sews suits for the Count. He wears her exclusively. She's more than his seamstress: she's his screamstress." These are the kinds of jokes a reader will find throughout the book; they're not fit for adults, but for smart children. Marshmallarmé gives the wizard a magical book, to help facilitate the making of the magic mirror. He tells the Count:

> It'll take the wizard some time to summon the archangel and study his secrets so that he can create a magic mirror capable of reflecting a vampire puppet. He'll need privacy, absolute privacy, so shall we all leave him alone to—Count?"

McCormack is punning on the word "count." "To count" suggests the magician's use of numerology or gematria to produce results.

Suddenly, the Count notices a strange smell (shit?) and poof!, Arthur emerges from the invisible; it's Arthur Rainblo. This is the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud. The count says about him that, "He's a punk! He's a prankster! … a brat, you see; but he's also the most succulent creature in *tout* Paris, the faggot dream of the *fin* de *fudgesicle*!" This neologism is made by combining *fin de siècle* (end of the century; here, referring to late nineteenth-century France) and *fudge,* fudge here suggesting fecal matter as well as soft candy, as well as anal sex. Arthur ingratiates himself with the wizard, and distracts him from reading the magic book. Arthur confesses about the Count: "There's only one way to deal with the Count: cruelly. The crueler I am to him, the more he loves me; the more he loves me, the more he wants to murder me. Also — I have an awesome ass!" He could be describing Rimbaud's real life relationship with the French poet, Paul Verlaine. But the wizard says he will not be distracted by Arthur's attempt to weave a love spell around him. He will not be seduced. Or will he?

Arthur Rainblo is like a male Guinevere, here inside Castle Faggot. He demands to be heard. He flatters the wizard, who is no Lancelot:

> You're the star of the show. You'll win out in the end, but not before you meet some monsters, suffer some scares, escape from some scrapes. You'll sing some songs. You'll make friends. You'll have romances.

This is like a description of King Arthur's knights' journey to find the grail. But here the story is filled with sex and the scatological. It's an anti-grail story! Arthur takes off his shirt but the wizard's clothes "are glued to my body." The wizard describes the beginning of their sexual encounter: "He puts my hand down his pants. His ass is soft. Soft-touch vinyl." In the grail literature, sex is opposed to love of the Holy Spirit. Think of what hap-

pened to Lancelot. In the grail literature, virginity and chastity are what the knights strive for. But this is not the grail castle, this is Castle Faggot! Sex is allowed. But only gay sex! No heterosexuals allowed. So the grail story is turned upside down. Gay sex is the magic act that will unlock the power of a "brown" mirror, convex like the curve of an ass, like a reverse grail. It is the act that allows the wizard to finally manifest the magic mirror. Aleister Crowley believed that gay sex was the highest form of sex magick and the most powerful in producing results.

The alchemy of McCormack's prose can be seen in these sexual, playful, and scatological scenes. His language is childish and evokes the language of great children's books like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Through the Looking Glass.* Except here the language is sexual, since we are in Faggotland:

> Arthur takes off his trousers. He pulls apart his cheeks. The asshole's like a mold for making asshole-shaped sweets … My tongue's tiny. It's a tasting spoon. What's on it. Sauce. Sauce like on a sundae — chocolatey and hot … it smears across my eyes and brow and eyebrows. Eyebrowns. Where's the cherry?

Marshmallarmé pontificates: "The ass is an abyss." This is McCormack's wink at French Decadence and the use of words like "abyss" or "void" in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire or Mallarmé. Further examples include:

> A mirror is the devil's ass. […]
> *Speculum fallax* [literally, a deceptive mirror] — this is what philosophers call convex mirrors, for such mirrors distort the world as the devil does. […]
> And convex mirrors are bulbous, like the best butts. […]
> John Dee didn't have a convex mirror. He had a black convex mirror. […]
> It was even eviler. […]
> The mirror meant he could capture demons.

Again, the mirror is like a grail turned upside down. In one sense, this means the Count can capture "demon lovers." But of course, the Count will also be able to infinitely view himself in the magic mirror because he is vain and delights in his vanity and bitchiness. And why not, after all, he's a ghost. Pull down thy vanity: NO WAY! Marshmallarmé tells the wizard: "John Dee practiced black arts in a black mirror," but "The Count will practice his brown arts in a brown mirror. He will watch it like it's a brown tv and he's always on every station." Love? He'll be in scatological heaven!

But there is a price to be paid. Arthur tells the wizard, "What were you thinking? You weren't supposed to make that mirror! You were supposed to fall for me." The wizard tells him that he did fall for him. But Arthur confesses it was Cocoa Chanel who told him to use his sexual power to distract and seduce the wizard, like the real Rimbaud seduced Verlaine. He concludes by telling the wizard that, "You were having fun, I was having fun. Then you went and wrecked it all." It's complicated. But love was sacrificed just as Eurydice was sacrificed in Cocteau's *Orpheus,* to create the poet. A kind of black or perhaps brown magic was necessary to create this mirror for a vampire. No other magic would do. The world must be turned upside down! I think of this as McCormack's poetics.

In fact, the second part of the book is to be read upside down; in this section, the text is not read from left to right but right to left. This reversal turns the world of *Castle Faggot* upside down, literally, as far as the physical book is concerned, and in the story as well: The book itself becomes a mirror! This remind me of how, as a kid, one used to play a vinyl record backwards, hoping to hear secret messages in the distorted vocals. And of course, in a mirror, we see the reverse image of ourselves. It is here in *Castle Faggot,* in this negative space, this underworld, that the impossible is possible; even vampires can see themselves in the mirror! And the mirror itself simulates the curve of the ass, and has come about as a result of anal sex. So perhaps unlike Cocteau, one doesn't need to kill Eurydice. She is already dead. And this mirror does capture demons. The magic

has worked. But at one point in the book, Marshmallarmé tells the wizard not to take anything so seriously because in fact everything he's been witnessing is actually a show that will air on television. In another sense, it was all just as Antoine said: show business. No wizard, no Arthur, no Count, no magic, no mirror. Smoke and mirrors, indeed. McCormack has created an artificial world on the brink of collapse by pushing the material nature of language to the extreme. And everything eventually disappears in a great puff of smoke and returns to the void: OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

Derek McCormack's *Castle Faggot* offers a unique reading experience; it is filled with puns, neologisms, and playful language, and is also wickedly funny. There are wizards, nineteenth-century poets, a magic mirror, and characters who are puppets or ghosts. There are vampires, hairdressers, clothes designers, magic dollhouses, and the book itself is like a mirror: All the kinds of stuff to excite a precocious child's imagination. But as Dennis Cooper cautions, in conversation with Zac Farley: "Children would really, really, really have to hide it really, really, really well from their parents. And they would have to put very heavy bedcovers over their head when they read it with a flashlight. Because parents would never understand this book. There are so few people of my age that I feel are worthy of this book." And Farley responds, "It's too good for adults." I second that. Read it if you dare. It is truly one of most memorable reading experiences of this year and I'm sure unlike any book you've ever read before.

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13

We Must Play Our Way into Utopia

On Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Cheerful Scapegoat: Fables* (Semiotext(e), 2021)

1. Beyond the Boundaries of Expression

A typical, if anything can be called typical, fable in Wayne Koestenbaum's new collection, *The Cheerful Scapegoat: Fables* is both cerebral and playful, abject and perversely spiritual, funny and serious; which is to say, it is an anarchic text, where intense desire electrifies the language on the page.[1] It's also a writing in drag, that performs a subversive and scandalous striptease, collapsing the authority of the King's English. It plays with many masks, wears many costumes, is theatrical, and is amoral. Sarah Chant writes, in "The Plurality and Quasi-Anarchism of Drag," that "Drag reinvents the experience of everyday life. Carol Ehrlich notes in *Anarchism, Feminism and Situationism* (Black Rose, 1977) that this is done by 'creating situations that disrupt what seems to be the natural order of things.'" Furthermore, Chant writes, "What fascinates me about drag is precisely this: it opens up the possibilities for mind-body experience, creating a space

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop,* 2021.

and opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of expression." It is a language that you can taste on your lips and it is a strange and wonderful elixir.

2. A Pessoan Gesture

Identity is fluid in Koestenbaum's prose, and the narrative voice is constantly shifting. The "I" is sometimes an omniscient narrator, sometimes a character in the story, and sometimes leaps out of the page to talk directly to the reader. In response to a question in "Conversation in Darkness" about whether there is a "non-sexy omniscience," the narrator responds: "No, it's always sexy to know, always sexy to spy, always sexy to partake of someone else's consciousness, especially if that person thinks her consciousness is ringed round by impenetrable forces." The "I" is split and porous. The writing is a Pessoan gesture, where multiplicity rather than unity, fluidity rather than rigidity, transsexuality instead of heterosexuality or homosexuality, become the strategic means of re-ordering thought to bring about a revolution that overthrows the established norms concerning gesture, language, and the body.

3. Pockets of Refinement

Koestenbaum is playing hide and seek in the language. In "Conversation in Darkness" the narrator engages in a dialogue or perhaps a monologue:

> Is my porousness an essential part of what you love?
> *What I love most about you is your near-invisibility.*
> And were I fully to materialize, you'd grow disenchanted?

The political, legal, and medical order demands compliance: to survive, one must submit to its codes. These systems cannot tolerate the unknown — anything that strays from their sanctioned truth or flickers at the edges of language. The "I" must be the authority figure, but the narrator in "Gauffrage and the Erotic

Limitations of Capability Klein" has a "bad odor. The smell around me is thick, like a gelatinous soup made worse by cornstarch. But within my bad odor there exists pockets of refinement and oasis, where you could rest between scenes, while you wait for your plunge into mal-olfactory, or Maillol Factory, Mal Oeil Factory, or Oiled Male Factory. Mere wordplay!" Authority or power is deflated; the "I" is a stain on the language, a cum stain perhaps?

3. Without a Specific Destination

What is transitional, borderless, migrant, not clearly defined in terms of sexuality, anatomy, and language, must be codified, documented, and made recognizable, reproducible, predictable, and linguistically consistent. That produces a good moral citizen: one who is moral and who's sexuality is not ambiguous. But Koestenbaum is not a moralist. In "The Gardener's Scarf," the narrator writes, "I speak on your behalf because I am a Sally, a male Sally, or a transmuting Sally without a specific destination on the gender spectrum." Koestenbaum's prose is not one with distinct edges. It is porous, the agency of the I is ceded, "meanwhile polishing the silver slipcase of your own inner tabernacle." The King's English would rather demand "constant verification" lest the precious tea room, sight of petit bourgeois pleasures in the nineteenth century, "slide into decrepitude that rubbed against its noble reputation, as two notes in a minor second rub against each other to create havoc."

4. Above or Below

The narrator in "The Gardener's Scarf" continues: "Only a perfectly logical and morally sound transport between sleep and death could allay the anxieties of a tea room inspector nervous about job stability and about his own place in a cosmology spinning out of a benign deity's control." In this sentence, Koestenbaum hints at spiritual concerns: The benign deity has no control. What is humankind's place in this cosmology? The narrator

says: "I've acquired a festering disease, lying here in a field of heather …. Radical indecision, unvisualizable and finite: am I in a blooming meadow, or am I in a basement?" Above or below? Paradiso or Inferno? It is "unvisualizable and finite" because the narrator cannot see into a Beyond, and thus our knowledge is finite, limited, as we are ourselves. Furthermore, he writes in "The Cheerful Scapegoat": "You could make it vanish [a stomach scar] if you were omnipotent, but you suffer, as do I, from a truncated vision." Again, our vision is partial when it comes to the divine. This reminds me of a quote from John Ashbery's *Flow Chart* where he speaks of "peaceful voices, rising / tier on tier / in the storied gothic cathedral, go unheard. Nobody thinks it's time for them."

5. Striptease

Human law doesn't just divide the world — it seizes it. It brands its partitions as rational, even scientific, while enforcing them through war and the domination of indigenous peoples. What follows is the machinery of nation-states, codes, customs, and the victor's pride: history written by those who crushed others to claim the map. In Koestenbaum's world the narrator, in "Bloomsbury Revisited," "makes friends with cineastes and buggers," and will turn his "love of pattern into a body part as despised and lionized as Van Gogh's ear, propped on a toilet tank to attract a loitering Salome." Here, I was reminded of poet Adeena Karasick's wonderful description of Salome in her book of the same name:

> Throughout Christian tradition, Salomé has been tagged as an evil murderess notorious for beheading St. John the Baptist. With phallocentric fervor, she has been serially exploited by Gustave Flaubert, Charles Bryant, Oscar Wilde, Richard Strauss, forever entrenching her in social consciousness, as a dangerous woman, a praying mantis who cannibalizes the head of her lover. Here, Salomé who descended from Jewish Royalty (the daughter of Herodias and stepdaughter of

> Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee), is not appraised as a villain, but hailed a hero — a freedom fighter; [… who] rejoices in her sexuality, in transgressive passion and female eroticism.

In "The Artist's Methods," we read: "Loincloth or not, I profit from obfuscation. Therein lies my amorality." Koestenbaum's prose performs a kind of striptease before the King's English, like Salome's before King Herod: "Without nudity, I'd have no alphabet."

6. New Vulgarities

In "Telephone Receivers or Cooking Spoons in Purple Haze," the narrator speaks of a new "Tenderloin technology [that] will soon be invented to recreate homosexual utopias in the desert, like Marfa: new choreographies, new vulgarities." What he is trying to do is reconstruct "the original fire." I think of these "new choreographies" and "new vulgarities" as a transitional, borderless territory in language: off the radar, secretive, nomadic, creative, imaginative, not bound by walls, codes, or laws. Koestenbaum's language is a rupture in the linguistic system, that creates, according to Hakim Bey, a "map of creative imagination, aesthetics, values … animated by unexpected eddies and surges of energy, coagulations of light, secret tunnels, and surprises." Can we trust Silicon Valley to invent something that helps the homosexual community? There is no golden age in the past that we can return to, rather "a new vision has overtaken this waking nightmare that pundits call a nation." This new revolutionary vision is Koestenbaum's prose. After all, "We're just lying here nude, trying to recapture some vanished essence." Something will happen.

7. Sometimes We Need to Push

Paul B. Preciado, in *An Apartment on Uranus* (Semiotext(e), 2019) writes that within this "new supra-state techno-patriar-

chal governmentality managed by the financial Mafia proliferates, experimental practices of collectivization of knowledge and production are emerging." In Koestenbaum's "The Artist's Methods," the narrator says: "I will help Valentin escape from prison. We will overthrow the government, in our own paltry fashion. We will take a boat to an unnamable island and start a new nude organization, of which Valentin will be executive director. Gulls and cormorants will serve on the board of trustees." A fantastic vision of revolutionary politics! Paolo Virno, a member of the Autonomist paper Metropoli, who was arrested in June 1979, wrote:

> The natural corporeal reality of [the] individual, his or her socially enriched senses, instead of constituting the tedious and superfluous empirical zone in which value is produced, suggests a different criterion of productivity, no longer based on the blind necessity of self-preservation or "time-saving," but rather on the variegated time of consciously planning activities…which, after all, is what Marx alluded to when he spoke of the composer of music and the work of art as anticipations in terms of a form of production without domination.

In "On Not Being Able to Paint," the narrator says: "There's no end to the derision surrounding us, and we sometimes need to take action. Sometimes it's not enough to put up with insult and expect people to change their manners. Sometimes we need to push." We need to act or nothing will ever change.

8. The Left and the Right Are in Bed Together

The narrator in "The Snow Falls on…" says: "The power relations between Sheila and me oscillate. Their non-fixity is a heavy snowfall landing right now on a tame Rottweiler…who is a pacifist…. If Sheila could forge me a draft card, I'd thank her, and then I'd burn it. I speak to you as paid representative of Sheila's dance studio, which doesn't yet rule the land." This is a negotia-

tion between power and freedom. It's always about power. But it remains a back and forth situation because while the narrator is a paid representative, he will burn the draft card which represents his contempt of the military mindset. You can't win against the system of power, you need to subvert it from within. And what about pacifism? Speaking of politics, in "The Greenhouse," the narrator writes:

> The greenhouse renovation crew had no love for nation-states; the crew, like the pink flower within the greenhouse, feared the arrival of totalitarianism on the palace's grounds. The palace, no longer part of a benign monarchy, had succumbed to a new dictatorial comedian, who'd stolen the place from the deposed king, and who was initiating a set of reforms that surpassed in cruelty any of the punishments that the king had ever meted out.

But the problem is that the Left and the Right are in bed together.

9. Subtle Acts of Warfare against Stillness and Ossification

We are invested in the logic of language; we believe that it is referential and that because of that it stabilizes our view of the world. The language police uphold the status quo of "Literature," enforcing an institutional approach to language, where it is supposed to be objective, obeying a kind of scientific method. Autofiction is the subversion of primacy of the author. The narrative "I" is not dominant, singular, enforcing a moral stance, but multiple and amoral, playing with language and identity. This is a form of revolution. Koestenbaum writes:

> When the Boston Tea Party made its statement, angering the mother country, the waves laughed, and I am now the freckled reincarnation of those happy, revolutionary waves, in a harbor built from contradictory patterns, injudicious cross-hatchings, like a horny bracelet of sighs worn by a glutton waiting for a ramshackle bus that may never arrive.

While needless wars are fought over ideologies, Koestenbaum is interested in re-framing perception to include playful, childish language in order to destabilize the language that perpetuates arguments that have no solution, like the ones the Left and Right fight over constantly ("the arid zone of diplomatic quibbling"). The narrator in "Profile of a Departed Cellist" says "We were gossips, flirts, hacks — unemployed tricksters, trying to cop a feel in the corridors of power. Would we succeed in hijacking power, or would sovereignty kick us in the gallbladder?" You must subvert the system from within. For Koestenbaum, this involves "subtle acts of warfare against stillness and ossification." As Hakim Bey writes: "Lay down a map of the land; over that, set a map of political change; over that, a map of the Net, especially the counter-Net with its emphasis on clandestine information-flow and logistics."

10. A Definitive Religious Document of Our Time

Koestenbam is essentially a materialist but there is also an aspect of his writing that contains a spiritual element. Tania wonders in "Dimples in His Tie," if the "flowers of confidentiality — asters, carnations, mullein — ripped me off by not materializing; they remained spectral. Was I enough of a loudmouth to force an intangible flower to develop an actual stamen and pistil?" Tania cannot mimic the actions of a god by allowing things to be created from nothing. The narrator writes "God punished Tania by dimpling his tie," which suggests a certain perversity about Tania. The narrative "I" intrudes and writes: "If I, like Tania, stretch my capacities, who will punish me … God thinks that He is in perfect control of his retaliatory routine, but miscalculations mar his stunt; I will itemize those errors in my account, which will become the definitive religious document of our time." This book can also be thought of as a kind of perverse religious document, amoral as it is. In the following passage from the fable, "Tortoise," the narrator invokes Eden and a "prime mover," casting his own version of the biblical story:

> I saw a father carrying a baby on his shoulders. The father was dancing, solo, by a barren apple tree. The baby was nominally part of the dance, but only as a passive passenger, riding on the prime mover's shoulders. I remember the flavor of that tree's apples, before it had ceased to produce fruit. The apples had the library-richness of aged port — moldering paper, fire-places, dust. I remember those apples, scattered like a spangled skirt around the tree's base. So abundant were the apples, we left them on the ground to rot. We regret the rot, but not the abundance.

He is speaking of the abundance of knowledge, the knowledge of our bodies as sexual but also the knowledge of books. "We regret the rot" because as a result of our knowledge we discover we are mortal, corporeal. But it was worth it to "take this much-touted 'tragic sense of life' and nibble it, as if it were a ginger snap." Not too much so as not to be overwhelmed by suffering.

11. Between the "Courtly Expression" and the "Spasm"

In "A Page from My Intimate Journal," the narrator says, "the tongue (if you will forgive my scientism) completed the divorce between cognition and organism." Speech divorces the language from its relation to the body. In "Decor Analysis," the narrator writes, "To explain these features would lead me back to Martha's chosen radio station, the one playing dismal oldies." To offer explanations is to revert to representational language, the objective language, where the subjective is in chains, not allowed to speak. To believe that language is referential is to suffer; to believe that language accurately describes the world is to experience failure when you discover the relation is provisional and arbitrary. Consciousness is bound up with the language. As Koestenbaum writes: "An alphabet doesn't delineate consciousness. An alphabet creates consciousness." But his language has the intensity of a collision between the corporeal and the linguistic. It is a supremely em-bodied language. The narrator of "A Page from My Intimate Journal" continues: "Careful's

candor, and its courtly expression, aroused in me a spasm of religious feeling." Strange that the name of the main character in the story is Careful. Koestenbaum's prose exists between the "courtly expression" and the "spasm." These "fables" are perversely formal but also delightfully playful. They are Apollonian in the rigor of their destabilization of the authority of English and they are vaudevillian in their stylized hysteria and outright playfulness.

11. The Mode from which Poetry Arises

Koestenbaum's *The Cheerful Scapegoat* overturns the classical idea of the fable as containing a moral: His prose is amoral, and delights in playing with the language, destabilizing meaning or common sense. But what is common sense? The sense common to whom? And moral law as it has been enforced over the centuries, to whom do these laws apply? To the commons? Who are they? Koestenbaum is a linguistic revolutionary; we won't find our way to a utopia if we are indebted to old, antiquated laws; it is useless to try to change or alter these laws in the accepted ways. The revolution will be in the language, in tracing the currents of meaning that flicker at the edge of consciousness, barely visible, and in playing with identity. Koestenbaum's prose creates an irrational space, which opens up the reader to thought that is associative rather than linear or sequential; it is the mode from which poetry arises. There is nothing like it out there in the writing world. Which is why you should read Wayne Koestenbaum's The Cheerful Scapegoat. Immediately.

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14

Anywhere Out of This World

On Cecilia Pavón's *Little Joy: Selected Stories* (Semiotext(e), 2021)

Cecilia Pavón's *Little Joy* contains stories about the nature of writing, art, politics, fashion, all seen through a perceptive lens that locates temporary utopias in the world. Her narrative "I" is multiple, changeable, inconsistent, as it moves through her language, and thus open to various new experiences which are often revelatory. Identity politics is just the residue of colonialism, and simply another form of political subjugation. Instead we should be multiple, move out of the box of repetition, expand our strategies. She surrenders herself to the world, to that which cannot be measured, that exists outside time, but is open, changeable, like the shape of clouds. She is interested in those spaces which contain all things as if in a potential state, not yet articulated. In these utopic states, things are constantly in motion, without fixed boundaries; everything is possible in multiplicity but not marred by being fully actualized. Whether speaking of writing, clothing, or art, she does not accept that which is regularized, formalized, predictable, but instead she values those things which are disregarded, tossed away, marginal. This also characterizes her prose which is improvisatory: Her words are

imbued with a mind constantly testing the boundaries of her thought. The trajectory of her ideas is not towards a finite real but towards the infinite, that which is beyond time, and exists in a space that cannot be so much seen as apprehended or felt.

The soundtrack of one utopia contains "music without an edge: monotonous, instrumental, bodiless, faceless, and genderless… it's the future, even if most people don't get it." She has a poet's love of music and is not concerned with conventional rhythm, melody, harmony, such as is found in European classical music. The sounds the narrator in "Fat Cat Records, or a Cloud with the Color and Shape of a Bruise" prefers are noisy, are compared to "hot, sticky wax" and she imagines all the people "lying in the dark, without drinking or moving," and just listening to this music; this constitutes a utopic space, which is pacifist. This reminds me of the discussions about the nature of music and free improvisation during the '70s. Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* was useful to me as an examination of "noise" as a political tool. The dominant system always preserves a recording of its power to preserve itself, yet these musicians who practiced free improvisation were against recording a performance on record. There would be no documentation, no trace, the music would vanish in the air. It was a deeply personal music, and it belonged to a secret utopia of musicians, that flourished in the '60s and '70s. Search the traces, the fragments, and they will lead you to the secret place, rather than relying on logic, reason, convention, the accepted path.

For Cecilia Pavón, real pleasure doesn't encourage capitalist production. In "Autopoiesis (1999)," the narrator writes, "What I mean to say is that in those dance circles, what really happened was we all stopped being people and became objects. We erased our biography (our flesh), and for 120 minutes, which were always infinite, music let us be blank sheets floating around an apartment in Retiro."

I remember dancing all night at the clubs in New York City with the floor packed, a bright, sweating mass of bodies, all of us electrified by the experience. We lost our selves in this kind of pagan ritual. And our individual identities were lost in the col-

lective experience of ecstasy. When you're part of that collective energy, you're open to possibilities of experience that are not limited by identity; you are no longer a subject. In that wave of throbbing bodies, you have a feeling of joy that is not bounded by notions of class, hierarchy, race, or sexuality.

In Pavón's temporary utopias, art should not be bound by the four walls of a museum or mansion, but "fly freely through the atmosphere and leave a trail in the air that surrounds our planet." Art's essence would be like a sound one heard that eventually was lost, except for the way it affected one deep inside oneself. Art would not be subject to the effect of time, subject to decay, or be seen in an artificial space, like a museum, gazed upon by discerning critics. This has a political dimension. For Pavón:

> Contemplating art ends all class distinctions and personal insecurities. Further, spectators are as much a part of the work itself as the artists. At least I read that in a British sociology magazine, and I think it's very true and very uplifting. It's far more important being part of a work of art than being part of a society, because works of art are made of dreams, and dreams can't be copyrighted.

In the story "Jeans," the narrator dreams of purchasing a pair of expensive jeans. The story is like a commentary on the art market: "The high price is part of the magic of owning something like that. It wouldn't be the same if the jeans were cheap and easy to acquire, Flora thought, though she was embarrassed to have thought that." She concludes that "the best thing wasn't thought, but action." And so she steals the jeans and hides them. But there is a fire and the jeans are destroyed. Art should be for the people. The old ideas about revolution are no longer relevant. The underground filmmaker, Jack Smith, once said that all the paintings seen in the museums are the worst paintings because the really good paintings were in the museum's basement or in the mansions of famous, or not so famous, collectors. Instead, he believed art should be hanging in houses or apart-

ments, should be available to all, and not to the restricted few who could afford to buy such art.

The narrator in "A Post-Marxist Theory of Unhappiness" ask the question: "Is there any other topic of conversation that doesn't lead back to love?" She continues, speaking about the contemporary world: "Nobody wants to get married anymore. Or have kids either (And that's why, like I said before, although I never got married, I'm not a rare species, just a completely average person.)" In "Nuns, the Utopia of a World without Men," the narrator quotes a character in the story, Carolina: "Let's be nuns. Let's go live in a convent." The narrator responds:

> Yes. Nuns are strange. They're like absentees. They live without men and don't have any troubles in the world. And what's more, I was in a nunnery once, and they always make jokes. They have a great sense of humor. They live in a kind of eternal bliss.

Eternal bliss is connected to being pure, like Diana, the hunter in Greek myth. The narrator and Carolina have an erotic encounter but they do not have sex. Nevertheless, the narrator experiences paradise in this encounter. Elsewhere, a narrator writes about how a good conversation is better than sex. In the present world, Pavón seeks to escape the regimes of masculine hegemony and sexual difference. The fragmentation and sense of lack inherent in the mirror stage in Jacques Lacan's theory is old news. Pavón is a total woman. She reverses the problem of lack and turns it into a positive: "The fact is that he is distant and loves me like a ghost is what allows me to write. Because I am an abandoned woman, *I can write*. I can say 'I' a million times. And by saying 'me me me,' I can also say that a woman who is loved from a close proximity instead of from afar cannot write." She will not be bound to a fixed idea, but always tests her concepts and admits that this might only be a "byproduct of pain" and in an hour or so she might feel differently. Nevertheless, this lack contains an abundance, reverses the typical romantic notion of

poetry and the fragmentation or chaos that is so much a part of everyday life.

The magical revolutions of '68 are no longer relevant; the factories don't exist anymore and haven't for a long time. Forget Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Marxist criticisms of the state. The digital world has erased the relevance of those ideas; we now live in a world governed by cyberspace, the internet, text messages, globalization. We are entering a new phase of the body that involves anatomy and the digital. In "I Want to Be Fat" the narrator writes, "The world is changing, and now is the time to invent new experiences. People have already tried every drug on the market, and they need to find new ones. Because the most important thing is to change." The narrator in "A Post-Marxist Theory of Unhappiness," says "Today we know that, in reality, we're nothing more than an extension of the objects we use or just another stage of an endless dialectical game between human beings and inanimate — or semi-animate — objects." She continues: "Furthermore, today we no longer consider ourselves at all similar to what in the past was called a subject. (Subject to what?). There is no longer anybody who feels isolated or stuck in their head, as many people felt in centuries past." The internet has allowed us to feel connected to people around the world. Email has made communication instantaneous. Text, also. And so a different space has opened up as a result of this. And it is utopic:

> We are all connected by invisible links, because the second-most important thing after fashion is conversation. We believe that the infinite exists in language and that language, just like fashion, doesn't belong to anybody; anyone can use it. It doesn't matter what somebody says or who says something. What matters is the scintillating, musical shade that the words in a conversation cast upon space. That is, in this world, here and now, content no longer exists; only form matters.

The digital world has created these "ethereal" spaces, outside the body, and outside time, where experience is not mediated by events in the real world. It is an ideal space, divested of the chaos and fragmentation of daily life. It is a space where communication is possible, and encouraged. It is infinite. Email, for example, is a kind of letter that can go on forever; it has no finite point. The narrator continues: "My loving is based wholly on epistolary exchanges. Starting a monogamous relationship would make me feel like I'm betraying an ideal. Through letters, seduction is infinite. And this gives me peace of mind."

In the past, time was a law and marriage was a way of organizing time, organizing and finalizing relations with the phrase "'til death do us part." It was a pact organized around fear of being alone and to generate offspring; love rarely survived as the years passed and was replaced by habit. For the narrator, speaking of the letters of her friend's grandmother, written to a lover who was not her husband, "infidelity was just a gateway to the infinite." Our grandmothers "had to measure and keep watch over the days and hours, the weeks and months. And marriage was one of the most stable ways of organizing time." But the digital world is not governed by time but rather by space; the ethereal space that opens up when one is communicating online is a virtual space which is infinite. The internet exists as something other, outside of time. Also, outside of this world. So now is the time to generate new experiences.

In the final story in the collection, "Diary of a Cloud Watcher," the narrator writes: "Music and everything else Earth has could also be compared to clouds. Waves and sounds that come and go. In reality the impulse to write was the desire to share that what I like about clouds is change. Transformation." In a sense, the utopic spaces that Pavón generates establish a kind of theology without a God. In such a world, the fear of death disappears, leading the narrator to observe that her brother's bones "will be dust, and soon, my bones will be dust too. Will the color of our bones' dust be the same as the clouds?" Furthermore, she writes: "Maybe thinking about clouds is the only way to avoid thinking of death."

Pavón's prose is heterodox, as her subjects shift according to the train of her thoughts, from one subject to another, not mediated by a fixed idea, but changeable, and not bound by the demands of content. In that, the stories resemble reality rather than fiction. The various utopias Pavón locates in the world are unlike any previous idea of utopia, such as those that governed the revolutionary politics of the '70s, and where Marxist critiques of the State apparatus were prevalent. Hers is based on transformation and change, not some doctrine from the nineteenth century. There are no pamphlets to send out to party members. She locates the spiritual in the quotidian but this has nothing to do with a concept of God. Her utopias exist in an alternate reality and writing is like a key to that world, composed of "fragments of something much bigger or smaller that exists in another dimension." Pavón's temporary utopias can be located in this alternate reality, as Charles Baudelaire wrote, "Anywhere out of this world."

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15

There's a Certain Pleasure in Not Following the Rules

On *The Works of Guillaume Dustan,* vol. 1: *In My Room, I'm Going Out Tonight, Stronger Than Me* (Semiotext(e), 2021)

In these three autobiographical novels, *In My Room, I'm Going Out Tonight,* and *Stronger Than Me,* the controversial French writer Guillaume Dustan comes to terms with his sexuality and his sexual desires, and tests the limits of his identity through sadomasochistic sex — embodying both dominant and submissive roles.[1] For Dustan, the construction of a homosexual identity involved a Dionysian frenzy of alcohol, drugs, and sex. *In My Room* goes beyond notions of good and evil in its utter rejection of puritan, heterosexual, bourgeois society, and, in doing so, Dustan is able to construct an identity. In *Stronger Than Me,* Dustan tests his limits through sadomasochistic sex. In destabilizing his homosexual identity — in terms of the power-play practices of sadomasochism — Dustan politicizes the S&M space as one where there exists, as editor of *The Works of Guillaume*

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in Full Stop, 2021.

Dustan, volume 1, Thomas Clerc, writes, "a democratic quality of sexual activity that did not assign defined places to its subjects." Another transformative space — where the "I" becomes the "we," where the singular gives over to the plural, and there is a sense of solidarity — is on the dance floor at a nightclub. *I'm Going Out Tonight* is devoted, in its entirety, to a single long night at a club. It is a place where Dustan abandons himself to the beat of the music and experiences a sensory release, dancing with all the bodies next to his own, and in doing so, he is able to momentarily forget, at the time, the death sentence of AIDS.

In My Room, Dustan's first autobiographical novel, is uncompromising, and has nothing to do with bourgeois conceptions about "art." Dustan writes: "I gave him my number and told him that I was always up for narcissistic activities, then I was rather negative regarding all that was 'art,' I told him I didn't give a shit about art. This snobbish asshole asked So what you into? I'm into the fuck of the century I said." His fearless use of the first person attacks the false bourgeois notion of literature and problematizes the idea of an uncomplicated experience of pleasure. In this first text, Dustan manages to not only construct his identity but begins to test its limits — a practice he takes into his other works — writing through the "I" as a pornographer, rather than as an elitist author who distances himself from his prose. Thomas Clerc writes:

> The "I" that appears in *In My Room,* which is closer to an amateur porn video than to "home sweet home," rejects intimacy, opting instead for the rawness of sexual representation. For that matter, the term "representation" is imperfect, and we prefer the term "action," as if Dustan were emptying sex of its human dimension in order to substitute the immediacy of pure presence.

It is through sex that he shows his defiance of the straight world, its nuclear family values and puritan ethics. As a result, his homosexual identity, as well his HIV-positive status and his desire to continue practicing unsafe sex, alienates him from the

gay community during the late '80s and early '90s when AIDS was robbing so many of their lives. He was criticized by the supporters of ACT-UP who, in light of the large number of deaths in the gay community, published pamphlets urging people to practice, as well as educate themselves and others about, safe sex. But, for Dustan, sex was a way of focusing his attention on something else, of clearing his mind of thoughts of his mortality. He writes:

> But tonight, with the quarter tab of acid, the coke I did, and all the joints I've been smoking, I'll be able to take it, and I know that an incredible feeling awaits me, every bit as mind-blowing as a parachute jump or a deep sea-dive. I like strong sensations.

But endless nights of cruising in clubs and parks, the danger and potential violence of a world of sex with many different men, often strangers, reveals in him a desire for love: "I told myself I no longer knew what love was. I didn't want to be on my own. I didn't want to have to go out searching for someone anymore. Stephane would eventually acquire the qualities he was lacking, and I would love him." But this is a dream that will not be realized nor fully explored in this trilogy of texts. Instead, the excitement and thrill of pleasure causes Dustan to reenter the nightclubs, in a frenzy of drugs and sex, to the sound of trance music.

For Dustan, the Greek gods, Eros and Thanatos, are entwined in the act of sex because for him and many others of the gay community during the HIV and AIDS epidemic, danger was always present. As a result, Dustan harbors a lot of anger and fear, mixed with desire, which at times manifests as a want to die or to kill another man: "I tell Stephane, Quentin's right, I do want to kill him. Maybe I'll want to kill you one of these days. That way the last thing you'll see before you die is me. I love you I kill you." Furthermore, he writes, "I tell him I want to kill everyone in the world, smash all the toys, stay all alone in the blood and scream until I die." This is as much an attack on bourgeois

values as it is the desire to confront his own death sentence with total abandon. Dustan is haunted by the very real experience of having the virus and the intensity with which he seeks out new sexual experiences contains the desire for oblivion. Finally, as a result of his first autobiographical novel, he begins to realize, and this gives him courage as a gay man, that "[he] live[d] in a world where plenty of things [he] thought impossible are possible."

For Dustan, the nightclub was a kind of sanctuary away from the concerns of daily life. During the daytime he felt people acted falsely, and hid their fears or actual desires under a mask of civility and restraint. *I'm Going Out Tonight* takes place at the Gay Tea Dance, a dance party in the French nightclub, Le Palace. Reading this book carried me back to the clubs of the late '80s and early '90s and the new wave, soul, house, and trance music that shaped my experience of those nights. I felt again the sweat, the burn of the lights, the dizzy surrender to the beat, bodies brushing past in a shared rush of sound and brightness. Night offered a brief utopia: a moment when individual edges blurred and the crowd moved as a single, breathing organism. As Dustan notes, day divides us with its routines, while night strips away the façade and lets us move together until dawn. In the club, one could be free, one could live out one's fantasies.

In *I'm Going Out Tonight,* Dustan writes, "I head down to the arena. I walk to the middle. I dance pure disco-freak style. Rolling my hips, clapping my hands. It makes me laugh. I feel light. Balanced. Suffering is unimaginable." This experience is preceded by a moment of internal peace in the club. Dustan is beginning to feel the effects of Ecstasy; he sees "nothing on the horizon but two couples, lovingly glued to each other." It is a rare vision of the possibility of love. Then he closes his eyes and the next several pages in the text are blank, as if this vision of love emptied his mind of all thoughts of death, of suffering, of pain. Until finally, opening his eyes again, he enters the dance floor and has the thought that, for this moment, in this almost sacred space, it was impossible to imagine suffering.

In the third text in the trilogy, *Stronger Than Me,* Dustan destabilizes his identity by engaging in S&M, playing both submissive and dominant roles. He establishes a space where identities remain fluid; he is both master and slave, and the experience of "pleasure" itself is problematized — in his essay, *Sex and Terror,* Pascal Quignard suggests that "pleasure is puritan." The text begins with Dustan's "coming out" as a gay man followed by his initiation into the world of nightclubs and gay sex. In these beginning pages, Dustan draws a clear distinction between behaviors that are accepted by the bourgeois society he grew up in and those that are rejected: Dustan, whose real name was William Baranès, was educated at a prestigious university and was a tribunal judge at the time when he wrote *In My Room.*

At sixteen years old, he wanted "to know what sex was like. Sex was stronger. Stronger than fear." He goes down to the Gardens of the Trocadéro, a place of homosexual cruising in Paris, and has sex with a man he meets there. But at this time in his life, he is ultimately not free from the desire for acceptance:

> In an interview, Joe Dallessandro explained that he liked big and strong guys who would fuck him and vulnerable girls who he could screw. I followed him to the letter. I didn't want to stop enjoying the wave of approbation that welcomed me when I entered a restaurant with Claire or Laurence or Nathalie, which wasn't there when it was Herve or Frederic or Christophe. I didn't want to blow my chances. I was made to succeed. To have a beautiful and intelligent wife, with a good name and a good family…. So what if I had to lie…. Say nothing to be accepted.

Stronger Than Me will chart Dustan's path from maintaining silence about his desires and putting up a false façade, to exposing everything about himself, through a relentless self-exposure. Despite the rejection by the mainstream homosexual community, this allowed him to be, nevertheless, finally free.

An older and more experienced man leads the young Dustan, the initiate, into the mysteries of gay sex. Next he goes to the sex clubs without his guide and immerses himself with wild abandon into the world of gay sex, which eventually, in this text, leads to explorations with S&M. He sees himself as an apprentice, gathering knowledge and experience in this particular area and learning what it is to live as a gay man. Day after day, he goes on the Minitel, the early French form of the internet, and arranges meetings, seeking sadomasochist adventures with different men — sometimes with multiple partners at the same time, either old or young. S&M was, as Clerc writes, "a sexual enterprise that considered itself both a vitalist response and a flirt with death." As a result of these experiences, Dustan transcends even his identity as a homosexual: He prefers the term "homosexual" instead of "gay" and he hates the word "queer." The word "homosexual" dates back to 1869, and Dustan perceives it as a medical term used to monitor as well as punish those who were thought to be "different." *Stronger Than Me* is probably the toughest book in the trilogy. It's the hardcore version of *In My Room* within which Dustan explores the potential extremes of gay sex — bondage, fisting, and golden showers — and he does so with an anarchist spirit, reminiscent of the gay world in the 1970s. Thomas Clerc writes, "Dustan refused to desexualize homosexuality (as a certain *queer* tendency would have it) but it was through sadomasochism that he would, little by little, free himself from his identity."

The three works collected in this volume focus on the body; their emphasis on sex, often of the extreme variety, is Dustan's attack on the, as Clerc writes, "very controlled world of turn-of-the century French literature," that had been "overcome, like the rest of society, by a wave of nihilism, melancholic cynicism, and ridicule linked to what can only be called a negative version of postmodernism." For Dustan, the acceptance of the hetero-normative life is deadly to experience. His work is, as Paul B. Preciado writes, "intimate and ferocious at the same time, dazzling and unapologetic." In his prose, Dustan exposes himself and his sexual practices to such an extent that his literature has the

potential to disturb a reader. A reader may not be familiar with such relentless self-exposure in writing on sex, especially gay sex. Such extreme visibility is only possible in porn and rarely, if at all, is it handled effectively in gay fiction, without falling into the trap of being erotic or being in some way romanticized. Normally there is a safe distance between the reader and the work, however transgressive it is, whereas in Dustan's writing the language is intimate, precise, explicit, pornographic even, and yet, ultimately, an attack on what is known as "Literature," such as, in *I'm Going Out Tonight,* where Dustan recalls his first time in a gay nightclub: "All these people, hundreds and hundreds of guys dancing, in the back there were dozens, beefy, shirtless or wearing white tank tops, like wallpaper. I thought — This is Dante's *Inferno*, and I rushed in." This autobiographical novel, like the others that make up this trilogy, is an invitation: abandon all hope, dear reader, and let Guillaume Dustan be your guide.

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16

No Longer Pretending to Be a Man

On McKenzie Wark's *Reverse Cowgirl* (Semiotext(e), 2020)

McKenzie Wark's experimental autobiography, *Reverse Cowgirl,* begins not with a birth, as these kinds of book generally do, but with a death: the death of her mother when she was six years old.[1] So the book begins with an absence. This experience will mark her life during the '70s and '80s, when she was growing up in Australia, before her move to New York at the beginning of the new century. For Wark, what emerges during her sexual experiences is a desire to non-exist, to blackout, to eventually erase her gender as a male, and to question what it means to be human: "This is the problem with being human. We exist for each other only when we don't exist; and we don't exist for each other only in those moments of raw existing. We are monsters of existence, and non-existence. That is all." This book will chronicle Wark's attempt to find a form of life outside the conventions of trans experience. Throughout the book, Wark uses quotes from straight, gay, and lesbian poets, writers, cultural theorists, and feminists to add a kind of commentary on the text. She cre-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop,* 2021.

ates a mosaic, an intertextual weave, a dialogue. She calls it her "chorus." Ultimately, *Reverse Cowgirl* attempts to examine who a trans woman is before she transitions.

For Wark, there is a central problem associated with existence as a male and so she desires "to make up a being so as not to exist." An aspect of this is performative: "There was a stretch of the seventies when clothes, hair, style — all of those things were unisex. All through that time, I dressed like a girl." Wark quotes Otto von Bush:

> Fashion is *feral,* it is that of the animal. Even if the culture industries and "techniques of the self" attempt to domesticate, control and commoditize the forces of fashion, in essence fashion remains a living thing, always with the potential of breaking free of its commodity form. Fashion is not a thing, it is not bound to clothes or goods, but it is a place you can go, an emotional space you enter inside yourself and another.

Drag allows Wark to "slip between genders, shimmy past masculinity for a moment, but not really launch into another gender; it was more a euphoria of lofting out of gender for a moment, composing some other body outside of gender's gravity. To nonexist in a non-existing gender, to float a femme phantasmagoria of skins and signs." Fashion is a way to create a spectacle that hides the absence, clothing the void. But fashion is also ultimately a kind of compromise, "a holding pattern in genres and genders, skins and signs. Holding what?" At this early point in the book, the question of gender still remains undetermined.

In reading *Reverse Cowgirl*, I was reminded of how adopting one gender seems so important to the medical and psychiatric community (and to far-right morons like Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson). For Wark, it seems "the fabric of the space-time continuum hinged on me being decidedly one or the other." She quotes Judith Roof: "What genders do: they provide the registers through which individuals can resolve the relation between psychical and social systems, finding vectors of desire and iden-

tification that persistently resolve lack and difference and by which these drives find purchase." Her gender is transitional and cannot be defined as one gender or another. It is like a black hole, sucking in all the light. More Dionysian then Apollonian. I'm reminded of the Dionysian mysteries and the intoxicants and trance-inducing techniques, such as dance and music, that were used to destroy inhibitions and social constraints, and to liberate the individual.

Wark constructs this provisional gender based on her lover Edward's. She is "not quite called into being by his [Edward's] quite explicit needs and desires." The problem is a linguistic one: there is no reference point in language that could define this transitional gender, which is not actually a gender at all. For Wark, when one slips out of the male gender one becomes a thing that is not clearly defined by the medical community or legal community or society. A sense of self vanishes. But how can one build an architecture of the self, when any attempt sees it consistently disappear as a kind of flicker at the periphery of things? How can one experience a sensation in the flesh that makes one conscious of a body? For Wark, to be fucked is to "become flesh." She quotes Maggie Nelson: "I am not interested in a hermeneutics, or an erotics, or a metaphorics, of my anus. I am interested in ass-fucking." In the absence of gender, the body is still present, to be prodded, used, turned over, *penetrated*. For Wark, being penetrated is the beginning of her realization of "a being I could call I": "Edward's cock would press my insides against their boundaries, pushing what would become, when pressed, against skin from the inside, a being I could call, a being I could call I. This coming into being, this inside out subjectivity, would change things between us."

Since Edward "tolerated [Wark's] femme affectation," she is able to subvert the role of the dominant heterosexual male. As a result, she lies outside a definable gender role and during sex, she is reduced to a body, that is all: "At best, it wiped me clean, reduced under his mouth and hands to fluttering flinching flesh, devoid of subject, gender, identity. Just being. For a moment at least. How hard it is to stay outside of one's self," that is, one's self

as a male. For Wark, being penetrated allows her to feel "opened up to the emptied spaces of other being, became a mere skin of receptors to its whims." As the male body subverts its learned gestures, language, and sexuality, an imaginative space opens where it can be conceived of as almost without limit in terms of its possibilities for pleasure; it becomes *trans*-human, and *trans*cends the male. She quotes Aimé Césaire: "One of the values invented by the bourgeoisie in former times and launched throughout the world was *man* — and we have seen what has become of that."

For Wark, there is a point where the male gender is drained of meaning, and only a body exists; the skin no longer seems real or even human. For her it seems as though it "might split open and disgorge some mutant pupae." So the body is potentially monstrous, as it remains undefined, undocumented, feral, animalistic rather than human. It migrates across borders of identity and gender, subverting male-defined territories, defying gravity, space, and time. The male gender is as if vaporized in a black hole and the body is turned inside out. Wark describes it this way: It is "disappearing into waves refracting on waves of data-foam, sensation of neither pleasure nor pain but of raw need to not be, to rage, to rile, to upend all the coordinates of a self in the body." The penetrated male unlocks a monstrous, alien, mutant cyborg: a trans-human, non-gendered space. She quotes Donna Haraway:

> Monsters have always defined the limits of community. The Centaurs and Amazons of Ancient Greece establish the limits of the centered male polis of the Greek male human by their disruptions of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality and woman. Cyborg monsters define quite different possibilities from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman. A cyborg body does not seek unitary identity, it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment.

After her relationship with Edward she meets John, a patron of the theater, who exists in a world of upper-class gays and aesthetes. Here she learns about class through the way she is looked down upon and barely tolerated. John, a rich gay man, treats her as a straight man might treat a woman: "I was the *handbag*. I was the girl. This was quite educational. I was not expected to talk, except for the purpose of social graces. I was not supposed to have opinions about things." Wark writes: "That was an all-stag world, and one where his [John's] homosexuality was simply overlooked." For Wark, the clone in gay culture during the '70s exposed similar tendencies:

> It seemed like they were trying to be more masculine than straight men. If straight men imagined they were above the women they fucked, then the clones would be above those men by fucking other men instead. On the logic that if you fuck it then you are above the thing fucked. Fucking men who were femme does not fulfill this feat of the overman. As everybody supposedly knows, us faggots are even less than women. Plenty of straight women would agree, and sad to say so too would some lesbians. The non-straight world was not free of its obsessive ranking and sorting. It was not communism. I wanted to destroy all of this.

The gay world simulates the straight world here: Gendered bodies simulate and perpetuate the roles of male and female in the straight world and from this is born the idea of the family and their consequent faith in God as a foundation; furthermore, the Abrahamic religions deny the raw animal drives of the body and attempt to sublimate them. For Wark, even the erotic became tinged with the sacred: "Some of you read a little too much Georges Bataille in the late eighties. Got a bit carried away with the sacred side of the erotic ritual. Sometimes it was just mammals rutting." For Wark, the thinking "I" must be separated from the body. The feral body is equal to ecstatic extremes that deny the individuality and primacy of the self, the

ego. Wark quotes Frank Moorhouse: "How hyper-charged life is when it breaks out of propriety. I was sorry, as I trembled there against his legs, for those people with well-behaved love. How good it was to have one's integrity utterly infringed, to be the trembling, crushed, infringed self."

Throughout the '90s, she lived with several women. The transition is seemingly back to the male gender but this relationship is complicated by Wark's sense of her position in relation to the woman and her sense of a literature written by men:

> Nobody needs to read another story by a man about, well, anything. Certainly not another story where the man fucks the woman. So let's just keep it to this not-novel but less storied dilemma: how does a man whose peak sexual experiences all involved being fucked in the ass go about having sex with a woman.

Perhaps, "the man in this story, who fucks the woman, is maybe not a man after all?" When having sex with a woman, Wark imagines herself as a woman being fucked and so she learns to be "a straight man fucking by listening to my inner girl." She continues: "But in the rub, the selves disappear anyway. They don't exist. For a moment it all merges into a particular and fleeting splash into time of the eternal animal." She quotes Bataille: "The tiger is to space as the sex act is to time." For Wark, the "I" becomes the multiple "We," without identity or gender, and the human, separating thoughts from the body, becomes "the eternal animal," experiencing "the instant joy of millennia past."

Near the end of the book, Wark realizes her focus on non-existence when she was younger contained something else, was something else:

> [A] dysphoria: a warp, a skew, a twisted strand. Within the need to not exist, a need to exist, but otherwise. The femme body, that I that is another, welled back up to the skin, the surface, and insisted that it stay there. Rather than non-exist as human on a part time basis, to transition to existing, all the

> time, as something that would no longer be pretending to be a man … to be human is to be and not to be, to be impossible, a folly.

She is now out as trans. But who is a trans woman before she transitions? For Wark, the realization of being trans begins with a need to not exist, which, in fact, masks a need to exist but otherwise. There is a sense of absence in the body that cannot be explained. Drugs and sex allow the body to feel at ease but Wark's failed attempts at both a gay and a straight lifestyle signal that these labels don't fit her sense of herself as trans. Furthermore, it's clear, in our time, that the established narratives for being trans are not sufficient. A new language must be created because the male language no longer applies. This is the linguistic revolution we need now. For Wark, she "will have to figure out how to speak another language of the body." This book contains passages that show exactly that, a new kind of writing about the trans body, that is both sexual and poetic: "just dying to be fucked, to be peeled and shucked and reamed inside/out until there is nothing but the body unraveled as one endless skein, a wicker-weave just wanting to tangle, to be fricked and unbraided until it catches fire." Wark's body has crossed over to a different space and time. She is like a nomad on the event horizon, a navigator at the peripheries of meaning, real and yet unreal, visible and yet invisible, a surface of unfolding and folding skin in the space-time continuum. Wark will no longer pretend to be a man.

In the present time where gender, sexuality, identity and language have been questioned and problematized, McKenzie Wark's *Reverse Cowgirl* is a central text in the ongoing argument of what it means to be trans. It is "more meme than memoir. Not a personal essay so much as an impersonal assay … it's not about coming of age, it's about the age of cum. It is not entirely factual." It's a book that contains a lot of fucking; at one point, Wark advises the reader to fold up the book and make a tube out of it, like an anus, and to penetrate it! So it's also a book to fuck! Wark continues: "It might however be a book about *sexual*

veracity. If something gets hard, or cums, or doesn't, that at least probably happened. It was probably more sublime ridiculous beautiful ugly than described." *Reverse Cowgirl* is an important book that challenges the medical and psychiatric communities' idea of a fixed gender and the present conservative push against the right for gays, lesbians, and trans people to exist freely in society. And it does this by examining a form of life that exists outside the boundaries of accepted versions of trans experience.

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17

The Art of Handling Losses with Nonchalance

On Cookie Mueller's *Walking through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black: Collected Stories* (Semiotext(e), 2022)

Cookie Mueller's *Walking through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black: Collected Stories,* contains all her published work as well as a few pieces that appear here for the first time.[1] I remember buying a battered copy o*f Walking through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black,* originally published by Semiotext(e) 1990, probably at the Strand bookstore in NYC in the early '90s. Soon I was searching for all her work. At the time, a teenage kid from New Jersey, I was spending nights in NYC at the Maya Deren theater at Anthology Film Archives, absorbing experimental films, including those of Harry Smith, Kenneth Anger, and John Waters (I first saw Mueller in *Pink Flamingos*). I remember going out to the Limelight in NYC and various other clubs, dancing all night and drinking, and wandering the New York

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2022.

city streets at dawn on my way home to Jersey. At the time I was getting an education in the alternative "spiritual" knowledge not taught in the Catholic schools I attended, which opened up new worlds, and allowed me to escape the confines of the suburban neighborhood where I grew up. I was reading Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, William Burroughs's novels, Jean Genet, Jack Kerouac, as well as underground comics like the *Freak Brothers* or Robert Crumb's *Zap*. I was going out almost every other night, riding in a friend's small, beat-up Honda with new wave and punk music playing on the car radio; we talked and laughed, on our way to the beach, or to a live concert, or a night club in New York. I was twenty years old.

Cookie Mueller's work was a revelation to me. And then there were Mueller's stories. She'd been there, done that. There were tales of go-go dancing in sleazy New York City clubs or safer ones in Jersey, helping a friend revive from a heroin overdose, and escaping with friends after the house they were staying in burned to the ground. But Mueller seemed never fazed at what life threw in her path and her writing always contained a spark of humor that suggested everything would be okay. You had to experience the good with the bad, the black magic with the white. No use forcing the issue. Let it go. Tomorrow's a new day. Her writing was a like a stiff drink, or a good joke to lift your spirits when you're down. Her pieces were on everything from natural skin remedies to adventures in Naples and at the Berlin Film Festival, her forays in the art world, her risk-filled life in NYC in the '70s; above all, her writing was generous. She was a wild card, the life of the party, an artist, mother, savior. In her writings, a reader is plunged into a world where anything can happen.

And often does. However random or amazing. Like her meeting John Waters, when he was a young filmmaker making waves in Baltimore in the late '60s. Her appearance in *Multiple Maniacs, Pink Flamingos,* and *Female Trouble* would make her a well-known actress in underground film. She jumped into this opportunity with gusto and a wonderful creative energy. She describes the process of making a film in this way:

> Making this film, we went to bed every night really excited for the next day's shoot. Perhaps there are other actors who can tell you that making films is really boring. This film wasn't. On big-budget sets, actors go into their private trailers, waiting for their camera time. Not on this set. We were all in the same room between takes, busy changing costumes, remembering lines, bitching about bit actors stealing scenes, layering makeup, getting reading to emote. There were no private trailers around.

It was about community, friendships; forget the ego. I could relate to passages like these when I myself, years later, made short experimental films. I shot my first few films with a small point and shoot Canon camera. I used myself as an "actor" when needed, or friends. I often wondered why is it that with the widespread availability of video cameras filmmakers still yield to the temptations of Hollywood and forsake the personal adventure of the small intimate film? Economics. Cookie: "On small films you get to know the whole cast and crew in a day, and all of these people are much more inventive because of the limited budget; they create effects that wouldn't have been born if there was more money. Necessity is the mother of invention; this is true." I've found this to be absolutely true.

After starring in several of John Waters's films, and others by different directors, and also in plays by Gary Indiana, she embarked on a writing life, writing her memoir or a column where she gave all kinds of advice or on art for *Details* magazine. Here's Dr. Mueller's advice for someone who is stopping using drugs and feels that life is now boring: "Well, if it's any consolation, I know exactly what you mean. What I do is this; I make sure I'm never lonely. Plan your day with lots of activities. Start going to the movies often. Get a hobby. I have an idea! Start painting and see if you can become a millionaire, one never knows. The money you would be spending on drugs you can spend on canvases and paints." This is great advice, no? I often imagine Cookie Mueller as a great Goddess, or Mother-protector surrounded by the orphaned or the lost, giving them

comfort. Her writing is about the importance of community: She's often in the company of her friends as they experiment with drugs, or travel, or listen to music together, and her experience and wisdom are scattered throughout these pages, delivered with a knowing wink, and a smile.

The alternative culture has its alternative spirituality and often has to fight against a materialist culture, where the pursuit of filthy lucre is a top priority: In San Francisco, Mueller and her friends are "the blessed ones in states of grace…we practiced astrology, yoga, levitation, transcendental meditation, astral travel, telekinesis, cabalism, prayer. We called on the spirits… but finally low-level energy swept through the Haight, destroying plans for the coming age. Some people gave up and became computer programmers and realtors." There are moments in this collection where Mueller's protagonist achieves a sort of visionary experience. In "The Simplest Thing" Molly, while drifting on a lake on a mattress, dreams of a kind of primal state. Mueller writes: "Maybe it was something she remembered instead of a dream. Maybe she was experiencing a flashback to the time she was in a fetal state inside the big womb. It all made sense, the women all around, the whispers." These are the moments when identity dissolves and one loses oneself in the cosmic egg. The subject/object duality also seems to disappear:

> She looked at that tree and remembered that delineations didn't matter, didn't exist. Molly was right in there with the tree, she and the tree were just a bunch of swirling atoms, a jumbled chowder. Her skin appeared to bag her up, like all human skin appears to do, but that was just the way it looked. She suddenly remembered that she couldn't separate herself from everything around her… She felt suddenly a fool. Everything was so simple it was hardly thinkable… she didn't hate anything because she didn't see any reason to take everything so seriously, things were okay after all. The sun would go up and down, she'd walk in it, days would go by, she'd eat and sleep in them. She was okay. Everything seemed

> a bit more friendly once she knew it as her everywhere she looked.

The Fool Tarot has the number zero, which refers to a person ready to travel in any direction, open to every possibility. It suggests the beginning of the spiritual path. Molly's personal ego has merged with the limitless, the infinite. The self is in harmony with nature. Once again, the mind and body must be open to all things. To be narrowminded is to close off part of the world. To perceive all things as different from each other, as well as the *same,* is what certain spiritual teachers maintain is a fundamental truth, although one difficult to fully understand, despite its apparent simplicity. Holy men are thought to have bright and glistening auras. But members of certain occult traditions set out to absorb *all* experiences, which they regard as *equal*. This produces an interesting metaphysical reaction: Their auras appear darker, less "pure," which is the hallmark of real experience and wisdom. Mueller sought to absorb many different experiences which led her to finally experience such visionary moments in her life.

Mueller's work was like a roadmap through the urban jungle: Her writing told you where buried treasure might be found, and the risks that were necessary to experience the "real thing." It was a reminder that if life got rough, to not let it get you down. See the humor in it. And don't take yourself too seriously. Great advice to youth, who have a tendency to take everything way too seriously. Her artistic temperament demanded adventure despite the risks involved, in the belief that art and total experience can revolutionize the mind. Reading her, one believed again in the utopian vision of a life that can transform consciousness and lead to a new vision of the future. But you have to keep your mind wide open.

From all her various and often zany experiences, she learned an important and fundamental lesson. In 1987, two years before she passed away from AIDS-related pneumonia on November 10, 1989, she writes: "'Things change. Life goes on,' Rob-

ert Crumb once succinctly said in a Zap comic book. 'Learn to adapt,' I would add…. Be calm. Tongue in cheek you must slither. The wild crazy days are over. Most of the great creative fanatics are dead, many are forgotten." It is sobering advice since now the World is not the world anymore. What we now call a "life" is mostly a stream of images, data points, saved messages, and selfies — surface without substance, untouched by duration. We feel the need to be productive; forget about doing nothing as this causes us anxiety. To be bored is to feel ashamed that we're not doing enough. We've internalized capitalism's overworked logic and accepted it as our own. We must free ourselves from this trap. Which is why we need Cookie Mueller's writing now to give us hope, or at least to help us take everything in stride and don't forget to laugh about it all: "There is a great art to handling losses with nonchalance."

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18

Uterus Contracts with Pleasure and with Future

On Julia Bloch's *The Sacramento of Desire* (Sidebrow Books, 2020)

Julia Bloch's poetry collection *The Sacramento of Desire* links the desire for a family through using assisted reproduction technologies to the inevitable economic and complex biopolitical factors that govern that choice.[1] In doing so, she meditates on the nature of corporeal existence, and the ability of language to embody such an existence, as well as questions of gender, control, and the nature of time. It is a multivocal book: A chorus of voices interweave with her poetry, creating a sense of the importance of community. But Bloch is aware of the limits of language and this problematizes her idea of writing a story about her subject. The book does not contain a series of easy solutions, it contains a shifting narrative, open to changing thoughts without resolution. Thus Bloch allows the language to move freely in an indeterminate space of possibilities. In this way, the poems are generous and open-ended, pluralistic.

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Full Stop*, 2021.

Michel Foucault, in *History of Sexuality, Volume One* (Vintage, 1990) defines biopolitics as a "power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations." Medically assisted reproduction manifests this power and has become a huge global business. But biopolitics is also the power to let certain lives die, and there are certain factors of control that are problematic to navigate, especially for queer and transgender people. Fewer reproductive clinics welcome non-heterosexual clients who, according to the system, present an undesirable image. Nicole Rank, writes, in "Barriers for Access to Assisted Reproductive Technologies by Lesbian Women: The Search for Parity within the Healthcare System," that, "Lesbian women face the greatest barriers because their lifestyle is viewed as non-traditional and even morally wrong. They also lack the benefits of legal marriage that are available to heterosexual couples. These women face religious and moral objections to access by doctors as well as other providers of ARTs (Assisted Reproduction Technologies). Additionally, they face financial, insurance, and legal barriers to fertility treatments." Trying to find their way in this environment can cause women to feel frustrated and lonely. That is why community is a central and important aspect of this book. Bloch writes, in an interview, in answer to the question, "Who is the audience for this book?":

> I definitely wrote it for the people who appear in the book. I wrote it for my community. I wrote it for my family, my friends, my poet cohorts. But I also wrote it for people who I don't know yet. I feel like I'm writing into a tradition, specifically feminist poetry, that is interested in making connections between experience assumed to be "personal" and more "political" frameworks or lives or contexts. I'm also joining a tradition of poetry that doesn't believe that there's only one voice in a poem; there are a lot of voices in the book.

The chorus of voices in the book is composed of quotes from various volumes of poetry and critical theory. But beyond this

community, the collection animates a desire that is inextricably connected to loss, to memories on the edge of consciousness, to Bloch's feeling of unease with her position both as an academic and as a mother. And yet she does not resolve such issues and prefers to linger in an open space of shifting realities and hopes. It takes courage to do this; it is part of the book's strength.

Bloch's language is abstract yet lyrical, multivocal, and linguistically heterodox. She uses medical terminology as well as colloquial phrases in her shifting narrative voice. The medical world codifies a body in order to naturalize it so that it conforms to the legal-medical foundation for its existence in a social-political space. But her poems are open-ended, unconcerned with resolution or fixity: "*ok so start tonally walking around this topic endlessly* No mastery, no center, just paraphernalia." Furthermore, the non-center of this book is ungovernable, has no sovereign. It is not mapped and defined. Bloch writes, "We all want to be new, we all want to be finished, but we are not new, we are exactly we are not exactly as planned."

She catalogues the responses in her body, all the while trying to find a language that is corporeal, embodied, that is, literally *of* the body: a sign that she is fertile. These complex emotions are exhibited in the following excerpt:

> Cramp/no cramp, cramp/memory, fear/awry, perceptible laugh in the cunt may I log on to this terminal while we wait, clots smear bye-bye dancer purple scarf sandwich maker clutch of cells each with its discrete corridors I've got it right here in my pocket, draped in muscle, this story … clack clack clack goes the young laptop who pretends not to listen to our lesbian cruising so slick and interruptive, once I would cut an outline for the approval and wait for it to spill into fullness but now am just listing flesh dissolving into no-time yet I did hear a lady say *you have a beautiful brain to us you are life-size*

This language, sonically harsh at times when necessary (clack clack clack, the hard "c" and "ck," when characterizing the laptop) involves a materialization of the body in the world. She

speaks of clots smearing and a "clutch of cells" evoking the processes inside her body. Throughout the book there are references to blood, mucus, cells, tissues, infections, syringes, which suggests the processes of knowing when she is fertile. But Bloch can't "chart some sort of launch as if futures were engraved." It is in a certain respect out of her hands. At times, she wishes for one thing: "to get this done." At others, she acknowledges, quoting Elizabeth Willis (significantly changing the "for" to "from") "*an assemblage is a body from which there is no escape.*" This would mean a certain finality which can be frightening. The "lesbian cruising" is "slick and interruptive" as opposed to machinic, where "machinic" (men invented the machine) suggests a robotic, steady motion as opposed to the flexibility or porousness of her language. She can feel her body dissolving in an attempt to achieve fullness. A loss of self; the emergence of the other. Time seems to be of no consequence. Furthermore, this muscle, this story, is in her pocket: a story not yet realized. Also, a story impossible to write: "Story is a loop — no, that's broken."

Bloch also uses what she refers to as archival language, seemingly more formal and technical, against language drawn from the applications of potential sperm donors. Her language is not hegemonic; it freely moves around the subject, pursuing lines of thinking, prompted by the quotes she inserts in the poems. The language can be characterized as containing a multiplicity of sounds and voices that become the strategic means of reordering thought against the established norms concerning gender, language, and the body. This allows her to question ideas about femininity and naming:

> Fuck that name haha. It's a terrible so feminine name haha. It's an awful simpering and weak I want it fallen on the floor stomp on its feminine face. Burn its femininity like spies and acid fingers. It's bad though to hate femininity like that isn't it because what's left then without the femininity aren't you feminine isn't femininity a scale isn't it a panting chair. But I care for the others.

Here she speaks a language that is not her own (to the extent, of course, that no one owns the language) and makes it vibrate with another accent; the words are not grammatically "correct," and phonetically deviant. For Bloch, "the body is feral, meaning of a deadly nature or dead by distraction." She commits a subversive act born of desire and pain; the passage is also a commentary on gender and community. In an interview, Bloch says: "The book is largely about thwarted desire, a desire for a child who does not appear. And so that makes that desire a painful experience. But it's also about what can be the wonderful experience of dwelling in that feeling in an ongoing way." If we accept that no one should be deprived of their rights, regarding assisted reproduction as well as any other right based on sexual orientation, then there is a possibility that we can change the script of this calamitous stage production we call life.

The Sacramento of Desire is also about the importance of time and the experience of it for Bloch: "From late menstrual to early ovulation, it's easier to say the thing unless it isn't, one and one and two and seven and seven and the face empties. Timing is participatory. Timing is actual, whereas other actions are diaphanous." The changing face of the future ("Uterus contracts with pleasure and with future") creates a new emphasis on the present, the here and now, and even though the threat of no future hovers overhead like an impending storm, the urgency of these poems expands the potential of the moment and creates new linguistic possibilities out of the time at hand ("*vulva on the table, anatomy is just as calendrical*").

But there is another order of time, another calendar, more primitive, spiritual, based on the astrological chart. It is a queer time, born of strange temporalities. Queerness is constituted by its difference from conventional imperatives of time. Jack Halberstam, in "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies," writes, "Queer uses of time and space develop … in opposition to the institutions … of heterosexuality." In the following quote Bloch writes about this alternate time:

> Later at the table Emma says the seventh house is contractual, house of dialectic; Libra, house of enemies, house of people you marry and people you hate; Saturn in your fourth tines her Uranus in eighth so there's clattering shock and sex and swimming in the underworld; there's no form outside the lesbian form. Aquarius new moon suddenly here like the demon Glory's ringlets.

In *The Sacramento of Desire,* the experience of this time has the power to create a spell by opening up a space for women apart from the dictates of the calendar, created by men. As she writes: "there's no form outside the lesbian form."

In an interview, Bloch responds, concerning a question about how she would describe the book: "It's about the desire for making a family in a world that can make that very difficult, especially for queer people who don't fit neatly into the categories that are offered them. It's about encountering the assisted reproductive industry and navigating Western and alternative medicine." The way we live now is a matter of speed and productivity; we've become productive machines, overworked and underpaid; our bodies are no longer our own but in the service of life-denying capitalist forces. The sexual organs are stripped from the body, treated as contaminants — sources of shame that turn flesh itself into a moral offense. Queer women and men face the techno-patriarchal governmentality managed and enforced by various financial institutions when it comes to assisted reproduction. Nicole Rank writes:

> Some providers (clinics or individual doctors) may refuse to provide fertility services to homosexual couples based on these religious values [Catholic, Islamic, Jewish] …. One of the biggest controversies surrounding assisted reproductive technologies is whether insurance companies should be required to provide coverage for fertility treatments. Lesbian couples cannot marry in most states, and very few employers provide insurance coverage for domestic partners. Even when this coverage is made available to same sex couples,

> these couples do not necessarily meet the statutory or medical definition of infertility. Ultimately, the question here is one of equality and justice: if insurance companies do cover assisted reproductive technologies for heterosexual couples, is it appropriate or ethical to deny coverage for these same fertility treatments to lesbian couples who also desire a genetically related child?

The Sacramento of Desire is a powerful feminist work that deals with assisted reproduction, the complex biopolitical and economic factors that are involved in that choice, the nature of corporeal existence and language, and the problems of control, gender, and time. We can only change the future, look towards a better one, by not repeating the past, by reading those books that challenge us and make us think, as well as keeping in view the terms of a community, creating a sense of solidarity, and for this reason I am glad that *The Sacramento of Desire* exists in the world.

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19

My Daemon Brother

On Evan Kennedy's *I am, am I, to trust the joy that joy is no more or less there now than before* (Roof Books, 2020)

Evan Kennedy's new book, *I am, am I, to trust the joy that joy is no more or less there now than before,* is a memoir of his passage from the physical world to an alternative world of the spirit.[1] By removing the established foundations of his reality, he establishes an open space for his reception of the "spiritual other," the anima that directs the body and is able to speak through and with him. In the first section of the poem, "Runt Savant," Kennedy writes, speaking of his childhood, "As far as I understand these sights, they are mine, and as far as I do not, they are, I suppose, God's," and "I wish to be admitted continually to a gentler order." At this point in his life, there is a division between himself and God but he also is aware of the problems in the world and desires a different order of reality. At this point, he also realizes that he doesn't feel shame. He is "trapped in a

1 A earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2020.

nonoperational body incapable of being understood." It is a terrifying experience but he realizes nothing much has changed:

> Today, there may be the statement that my body had been, or still is, nonoperational, or not as operational and sensate as I should like, then something comes along to keep me from staring at my roots. I become distracted by something I cannot identify.

It is this sense of lack or absence that signals the presence of something else, an other. He writes that he was born "ruined." In the doctrine of Gnosticism, the world is imperfect and so is man because his is trapped in the material body that stifles the esoteric light within. Kennedy also speaks about the solidarity he felt in the classroom as a child. But he realizes that this could not last, and that he eventually would have to abandon this pact and go out into the real world. There he learns that there are many enemies who would want to hurt him. He struggles to maintain a sense of innocence in relation to the world. But even at this early age, there was another force pulling at him, causing him to begin to extricate himself from his body. Until finally, he simply felt like a passenger in the world, on a moving train, whose destiny would be an encounter with a spirit, that will change his life forever.

Throughout the book, Kennedy speaks of the limits of the body. These limits bind the body to its corporal form, where one experiences the collision of its surfaces, the spillage of fluids — piss, shit, filth — and ultimately the decay of the body and the ruins of love. He writes, "My book is a mop that accelerates its efforts at absorbing my fluids whenever I accelerate by destructing body." Union with another body seems impossible. At this time, he makes a distinction between semantics and the sonic quality of language: "I am still in disbelief that the alphabet before you stands in for the sounds that I have been making." But language is no help in bridging the distance between himself and the world. Yet he is moving away from the laws of the physical body, and language, so that the spirit can manifest. It

is essentially a metaphysical project, that was suggested in *Jerusalem Notebook,* where Kennedy wrote, "I had been compelled from home / to sink at the tomb toward some kind / of mansion on high." He would like to be "sick with that body and its operator." This is because of his frustration and inability to exist with the other "as a singular breathing." The body, as we know it, has become extinct, entombed in the flesh; the human must be reconfigured, recontextualized, in terms of its function. Kennedy writes: "I said to myself, *Perhaps I will have written myself out of a body*"; thus, being outside of time, and cause and effect, and not subject to decay and ultimate ruin, his desire could be consummated in the spirit.

At one point, Kennedy suggests this different context for the body in relation to the "other": "I would prefer to discover the relation between my blood flow and another body's curves." The thrust is outward, and towards an other; this violates the sense of a fixed identity or self. He seeks the self's oblivion. The trajectory is from the "I" of the body to the "you" of the spirit:

> In a work, if no body is present, it could be said that spirit is suggested: when a body happens to be present, there is the occasion for an alternate anatomy to be brought in the open. I in that bed, I was concerned with inner depths as well, but I never dared ask my artist whether this portrait looked a thing like me.

The self has become increasingly unfamiliar, unrecognizable, in the dark. This darkness is necessary so that an esoteric light can flow unimpeded by the corporeal body. The following is from the Gnostic gospel of Thomas:

> Whoever does not know the work of perfection does not know anything. If one does not stand in the darkness, one will not be able to see the Light. There is a Light within a person of Light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark. If then the Light inside you is darkened, what darkness that will be! For this reason I say, if one is whole,

> one will be filled with Light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness.

For Kennedy, this darkness is positive and not the darkness that suggests evil in Christianity. It is a moral stance in which the self is not the center of action. It is in the negation of this self that one can achieve a better understanding of the world by allowing the spirit (the esoteric light) to emerge. It is an attempt to seek a different order of reality. It also an attempt to "tune out the police sirens." About this darkness, Kennedy writes:

> Darkness, of course, is not limited to the world but is also reflected within our very selves…. Having the darkness implies that we are alive, and acknowledging this is to have the darkness. The best outcome is a moment here and there of transcendence, such as an affirmation of goodness or an expression of care that opens a view upon a brilliant totality that includes us.

This metaphysical project has as its focus a transcendence of the limits of the physical body. Some call holy men radiant, their auras bright. But in certain occult traditions, seekers aim to absorb every experience as equal, and their auras darken. That darkness marks the total experience and the erasure of the self.

Kennedy describes a sensation where the "I" dissolves and encompasses all of space, becoming the sensation *itself,* because there is no separation. In the section, "Positions of a Passenger," Kennedy writes:

> Forgetting where I am for a moment, I am only a passenger within human anatomy, rather, human-enough anatomy. If I register sensation, I become it, or its resonance, slurring my surroundings if I am speaking, or blurring them if I am watching.

The very language is not properly spoken but "slurred" and the visible not clear but "blurred." The representations of reality are

breaking down. He is in a transitional space, between the corporeal world and the spiritual world. Certain occult traditions speak of the aspirant's defining moment in the desert, where everything is lost, after one has cast off all the unnecessary parts of oneself, and when there is no hope left and language fails. But when everything is lost, *something* does remain: god. Kennedy writes:

> I write my biography and lose interest in who I am. I am not performing an autopsy or life study. I might be past examination. / Not to disappear up my navel, I am staying responsive to the world from the quiet of my room.

This project must not be understood as escapist but metaphysical. Stillness, and increased perception, indicate that something is trying to break through. It begins with noticing that the physical world is imperfect.

In spiritual traditions one's "holy guardian angel" is defined as everything that is not "I." Kennedy suggests this experience early in the book, when he speaks of himself in terms of the very large and the very small:

> I am finite between two kinds of infinities: whatever is larger and whatever is smaller than me … what else am I but a station of a particular size, a site of countless appearances and disappearances … though I am certain I am finite, there are perhaps an infinity of finite things that shape me.

In *The Sissies,* he began working towards this experience: "It's the outside that concerns me here, not the so-called organic realty that is my pustular and blistered body." There is a moment near the end of the second part, "Positions of a Passenger," where the body has become an ecology; the body crosses the line between the human and the animal. "Unheard colors are seen on the flora and fauna found on and inside me, a terrain of musculature and fatty deposits"; and "the hollow of my groin attracts

forms known for their resilience through the seasons." The self is coming apart and distinctions are disappearing. In the following, Kennedy is no long writing about himself but addressing the other, the "you," the "anima":

> You must take me as just one erotic and neurological, sensate and creative totality: one nose, two eyes, two arms, two legs, ten fingers, ten toes, though my description here becomes presumptuous: I have not recently verified these figures.

The experience of despair, in a spiritual desert, has caused this change. It has resulted in the realization that one is alone, but no different from that which one considered other, such as nature or the animal kingdom; one is in the process of being *othered*. The separation between "I" and "you" is dissolving. It is first indicated by this alternate experience in relation to the physical world. In *Jerusalem Notebook,* Kennedy writes: "Heaven be praised — I mean earthly city." The second part of the book ends with an eclipse; this mirrors the darkness necessary for the light to emerge. It is also necessary to free oneself from attachments to the world: "In the darkness, I started taking steps from the crowd with almost alien movements, loosening myself from affiliation." The body begins to enter a new context.

The final section of the poem is entitled "Your Life." The speaker is now in the company of his "daemon lover." I use this phrase in order to suggest a kind of carnal relation to the god as well as to highlight the fact that this spiritual light is not necessarily Christian but Gnostic. I have also used the Greek spelling to distinguish "daemon" (meaning anima, spirit) from the Satan of Christianity. This "daemon" is the light-bearer. Kennedy writes:

> You suggested a method that would leave me still standing and speaking, reshaping my mouth to announce my extinction, not only to antagonism but to many of my actions and thoughts. Let me find your gestures turned into my reflexes.

He is losing control of his self. The poem is never about control. He addresses the daemon: "I am most content when I appear as your mysterious arrangement of the piles of atoms creating my physical dimensions." He is still, in a sense, bound to the physical body. But he is aware that the body contains mysteries. Furthermore, Kennedy writes: "I hear within me those syllables you spoke." This is dictation. In this section, Kennedy speaks of the limits of language and desire:

> When I say that your arms are around me and that they are not, I speak to the limits we face whenever we are together. The limits of my language are far worse. If I am ever to speak properly about you these connotations must change.

Language is insufficient when expressing metaphysical desire. Something must change; there needs to be a new context for the body in relation to language. But of course, Kennedy, is still in the world. Human needs occasionally conflict with the spiritual. He is on the edge of both terror and elation when he says: "I might be taken out of myself so that the light you tend to is no longer obstructed." In Kennedy's book, *The Sissies,* he already spoke of this relation to the god and of what he would have to dispense with in order to join with his "other half":

> glad to find your presence
> through weak means
> I absent this body
> bad habits like hunger
> and toward your wondrous
> correction of poise
> no allure but yours
> or event untended
> but sent clothed
> in fists or fond severance
> set within one

Kennedy is aware that, "When I first laid eyes on you, I knew we would spend a life together, but not mine, at least as it was or continues to be." As a result, he realizes that his memoir was an attempt to write about an "incomplete form of a life" and this was a mistake. Now, he has clarified the nature of his desire and realizes that when "you pulled me out from it [his body], you bent my chronology into circularity, the circularity of return." In Gnostic belief, after one has been released from the physical body, one returns to the original realm of light. The transformation is complete.

The book concludes with an interchange between "I" and the "other": "You asked me what was on my mind, and I said that I was thinking of how to reply. When you asked, *To What?,* I said *To how you indicate a life*" since it is "*difficult to follow the tenderness of your ethics*." The "other" responds: "*It's not about imitation but sustaining the care shown by your friends*." Perhaps, this includes a kind of return to the solidarity of childhood. In any case, this metaphysical project is also concerned with breaking down the false differences between each other. The "daemon lover" will watch over him and teach him things. In the final passage of the book, Kennedy writes: "There was a pause in our conversation, though all else continued. By this time, it was dusk, or it was dawn, and a passage opened within me, and I said," and the phrase ends there, in mid-sentence. One option is to interpret the passage as ambiguous, suggesting incompleteness or the unknown. But it is interesting if we take the title of the book as a kind of response: "I am, am I, to trust the joy that joy is no more or less there now than before." This sentence does not end with a question mark, which calls our attention to the use of "I am" and "am I." The former stands for the "I" that exists (the self) but the latter is the "you" that exists (the other, the anima). There is no distinction here between "you" and "I." I = I. Not either/or. The god is man; man is god. They are one. The line is now a circle. According to Hermes Trismegistus, "God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." But Kennedy writes, "My promise to you is as yet unarticulated." It is beyond language, yet the words of the title

seem like they are those of a kind of divine being, the I that is I, speaking of the creation of the world at the origin, or after the flood. Nevertheless, Kennedy places his trust in joy, in opposition to violence and hatred. His book contains the hope that another order of reality is still possible in this world. *I am, am I, to trust the joy that joy is no more or less there now than before* is the work of a consummate metaphysical poet. Evan Kennedy is a light-bearer in a world that grows darker every day and for this reason, I am glad his books are in the world.

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20

A Son of Starry Heaven in the Flesh

On David Brazil's *Antisocial Patience* (Roof Books, 2015)

A son of starry heaven in the flesh
Drawn by his lust into the turbid pool
Must strive to recall what it was he meant
To do by being born upon the earth.
There was a thing to find: so set your course
Away from griefs, and toward that holy thing.

The quality that makes David Brazil's work unique among contemporary poetry, is, among other things, its prophetic tone, which is interwoven with his concern for social justice. Reading his *Antisocial Patience,* I kept thinking of William Blake, who himself was aware of the sordid streets of London and spoke out against the social evils of child labor, but the language was charged with that of prophecy.[1] In our time, we have seen the

1 William Blake, from *Jerusalem*: "I behold London; a Human awful wonder of God! / He says: Return, Albion, return! I give myself for thee: / My streets are my, Ideas of Imagination… / I write in South Molton Street, what I both see and hear / In regions of Humanity, in Londons opening streets. / I see thee awful Parent Land in light, behold I see!"

various Occupy movements, the attacks on the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, on immigrants, and the numerous shootings and violence in our streets. Not London in the early nineteenth century, but Oakland in the present, where Brazil lives and works in a bookstore. We are caught in an age of ideological fracture, where political noise drowns out reflection and leaves us estranged from the spiritual, absorbed instead in the demands of material life. There are people in the United States working paycheck to paycheck, immigrant children are ripped from their parents at the border, there is the rise of nationalism, bigotry, and racism. How can we counter such a world? Is a revolution possible? What are the questions we should be asking ourselves? Brazil's invocation of a sacred tradition is not escapist, but a way of realizing an alternate vision of the world, one that is inclusive rather than divisive. He refuses to frame the questions using the language of the colonialists but rather the language of the spirit. So much of the American discourse on the Right, parading as intellectual discussion, is neither intellectual nor discursive, but rather, argumentative and angry, in support of ideas which often have no real basis in reality, and are essentially racist, in support of "Christian family values," and concerned with "pride for the white race" to the exclusion of everyone else, particularly those who practice the Islamic faith. So, for Brazil, the frame changes. To engage in the arguments supported by the Right is to become ensnared in an infected discourse that a liberal-minded individual cannot hope to make sense of.

For Brazil, it's primarily a matter of framing: "To be serious means to be able to reconvene yourself according to a new postulate, which is to find a belt of force where it lingers undreamt of someplace in your body." Gustaf Sobin spoke of how "the / least / shift in syntax, tense / perception, would / re- / set the / heavens." This is an idea that has its roots in Kabbalah, and the divine basis of letters. For Brazil, the revolution, in one respect, is in the use of language. There is a lyrical quality to Brazil's work, which is neither a personal outpouring of emotion, nor an elaboration of facts. It is also disjunctive; the lines break to let the light out. The music in Brazil's book is an older music,

harkening to the language of the King James Bible or the troubadours: "Love, to give love unto his subject hearts / hath wove a song is made of days…. A song is any answer that you give." In the latter line he uses the Scottish word meaning give. The tone of "hath wove a song" is something out of King James. These qualities give to the poems the sense of a greater project, acknowledging something greater than ourselves, namely God, to which Brazil offers his works as prayers and invocations of the dead: "Any poet worth her salt talks to the dead / By means of her own soul which undoes the walls / placed on gross sense as payment for our errors." When Brazil uses a word like "soul," he is seriously following a sacred idea, there is no irony, or special effect that he seeks to display. Here, he reminds me of Ezra Pound, and the way Pound was able to inject new life into archaic language in his translations. In doing so, he was able to access a certain "spirit" or essence. Brazil is doing the same thing with archaic language and rhythm:

> Bound to time by song and law this flesh seeks measure,
> drawing up from memory whatever will advance it,
> erring by not owning that it knows such memory is double,
> draws it down or lifts it up as it intends by its relation,
> for was such dreaming turbid and of earthly wishes it declines,
> but what you loved here transfigured into light which
> link by link delivers you unto the canopy of stars the
> meeting place where you have done the work to forsake you.

Because furthermore, for the daily resurrection that Brazil speaks of, he writes: "attainment of the body we shall gain for having forsaken this body, / how do we untangle doctrinal snares, / how use longing as a counterspell to cure us of our misplaced loves." Rather than maintaining identity as part of a culture of personality, or thinking of our present focus on identity politics, Brazil is concerned with abandoning the self to merge with the collective, "the canopy of stars." A body of light rather than the body of flesh which is composed of "gross

material." Brazil's spiritual manifesto is fundamental: "Take light seriously." Brazil can also move seamlessly between mundane facts and considerations of our spiritual nature:

> de- / parting from the cantus firmus like a book you just
> cannot get into,
> but what the fuck is going on with those upstairs neighbors,
> what
> are they moving around up there, is
> rigorously closed to any knowing but by a chance interven-
> tion like
> they need your help to catch a mouse or
> you become friends.
> Mouse is the same word in Hittite, we
> been coughing up a facet of the law for flickers of the moon,
> for
> an attunement, as
> the soul is known as a thing than can count.

In the Kabbalah, such a movement from Malkuth to Kether represents a rising from the material world to the world of the spirit; humankind rises up to the spirit but the heavenly tree also grows downward.

Following a spiritual and philosophical doctrine in a materialistic world involves risk and is a difficult journey, fraught with errors and hidden dangers: "I see the swords & spears of futurity, all / that befalls this corpus glossed to give / a matter to its inward Genius, grown / Impersonal in late light of this crack'd episteme." Profit, greed, racism, bigotry, persecution of marginal figures; our understanding is indeed cracked, fumbling in the dark of late capitalism for meaning. Who can we trust? For Brazil, Judeo-Christian mysticism provides a path through the darkness, seeking mercy or grace. It is an unconventional use of these materials, invoking Blaise Pascal, Origen of Alexandria, and Baruch Spinoza. That is somewhat rare in US American poetry, which remains essentially secular and materialist, though there is evidence of certain currents of spirituality in

contemporary poetry which, nevertheless, remain marginalized. Language is not enough. All poets know this. But failure leads to longing, desire, a desire that is not consummated, except in self-abandonment. Which calls to mind certain Sufi practices. Poetry is, above all, about discipline: "so pray & / shrive & build your domicile out of / aspiration going unashamed amidst an / earth consigned to the fire. Find / the ground covert with pearly grain." It is amazing to see these lines written by a contemporary poet! The tone is prophetic, the context is confession and absolution. This is a purifying of the body in the mystical sense to be able to draw upon oneself the light of understanding. It is a very unique use of Christian mysticism in a contemporary context.

But there is also something theatrical about the work. Having seen a video of Brazil on YouTube, giving a reading at the Poetry Project, I was struck by his performance. The overall sense of it reminded me of a slightly mad preacher on the street: This is the visionary madness that overcomes the poet in the grip of the spirit. So this poetry is not hermetic, but eminently social in its function. In many ways, the poet, like the mystic, is a sham, a shaman: Everything in the mystical doctrine is false until it becomes true. That is the secret. The preacher overacts, gesticulates, raises his voice to create a spectacle, to charge the language, to put a spell over the audience. Perhaps, too, to raise consciousness. A sham. A shaman. As in Pound, Brazil uses an artificial language to create a response in a reader. I am thinking particularly of Pound's translations of Cavalcanti, where he charges the English with an artificial language, drawn largely from the Elizabethan English. That creates the magic of the poem, and it is a quality also present in Brazil's work. His language is a compound of the vernacular and the archaic, the material and the spiritual, the romantic imagination (in Robert Duncan's sense of the term) and the Spicerian distrust of language. After all, he's a poet from California. And reading the poems suggests he is well versed in poetry and hermeticism, but there are no obscure references or historical details, or names, etc. which would weigh down the line. Like William Bronk, his

poems suggest more than they explain. It's this restraint that is the source of the poems' strength. The original quality of his work stems from his focus on a Judeo-Christian mystical framework to confront the very real problems in late capitalism. As a poet would, of course, and not a priest or rabbi: the Zohar as well as the Torah; the Catholic Bible as well as the Gnostics. That is the project and he writes that you "don't get away with not / choosing. For / birth is crisis." This is a Gnostic idea which is important for understanding his poetics. This is recovery work, the art of remembering the dead. Brazil quotes a John Wieners poem "Patricians," from *Behind the State Capital or Cincinnati Pike*: "Death is strong, death is the race." That is also part of the project: the recovery of what is lost, the traces, barely visible at the edge of oblivion, the dead language. To realize:

> The gold inside of any ache you honor with
> sufficient dreaming on to it, you spill &
> you lavish, you are its garment, undoing
> the premises according to an upwelled sovranty in
> you, accordingly it shall be known as
> coronary gold. For you are washed today
> for your own coronation.

One thinks of the Emperor Tarot card, which signifies confidence and internal strength. From weakness emerges strength, from the black to the golden: a purification process. This is the alchemical connection between sovereignty and gold. These are Brazil's means of "reckoning with each having-faln-out / thing, the streaks of such I was announcing here, a fatal transit for a worldly thing, having such time alone to make his *artifice* of thought … that we sit down to do our work's imperative and the first stage of work is remembrance." For the sixteenth-century philosopher, mathematician, poet, and occultist, Giordano Bruno, remembrance was a magical operation. He envisioned separate doors inside the mind behind which there were ideas, things, people, etc. The ability to access each "door" without difficulty was considered a magical act of the will. For Brazil,

there is also remembering the dead, the millions dead in the Holocaust as well as the atrocities committed every day because, according to Wieners, whom Brazil quoted from above, "The race belongs to the strong. / The race belongs to the strong. / Death is strong, Death is the race." The title of this poem is "Patricians." Think of the wealthy in America and the status of the poor. Then think of Saint Francis. According to Christian tradition, in 1224, he received the stigmata during a vision of the seraphic angels while in a religious ecstasy; this made him the second person in Christian tradition to bear the wounds of Christ's passion. I only mention him to show that such experiences of ecstasy are largely absent in today's culture, except perhaps among marginal groups, but that such discipline and concern with spirituality, the "holy things," in Brazil's work, shows that poetry can convey this quality of visionary passion. In Brazil's modern form of spiritual practice, restraint and discipline are as important as ecstatic release.

This book is called "antisocial patience." This is the withdrawal from the world in order to contemplate the mysteries of life. St. Francis, himself, withdrew increasingly from external affairs later in his life. It is a common practice among saints and holy people. In the wake of Occupy, when the dust has settled, the poet has time to consider his next move. Of course, it requires patience. Illumination does not come quickly. And it cannot be forced. Like the poem. It requires a kind of preparation for the mind and discipline of the body, for the transubstantiation to occur, for the poem to begin.

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21

Writing through Brandon Brown's *Top 40* (Roof Books, 2014)

In *Top 40,* Brandon Brown writes through the top forty songs on the chart of September 14, 2013, marvelously deconstructing the music to produce an intelligent and persuasive argument in favor of treating this music seriously as a political tool. Conventional wisdom, as they say, would have us believe that this kind of music is tacky, simplistic, overproduced, filled with clichés, and really not worth a listen except perhaps if you're an excited teenager, on a libidinal high, with your boyfriend or girlfriend, your hearts palpitating, etc. before you knew about the real world. You get the picture. Certainly no one over forty listens to this music. Right? Well, no. And what's so wrong with that picture anyway compared to those first grey hairs and wrinkles, etc. That's quite another picture. But by then we have learned the meaning of suffering: "When you feel home-ly love for someone, their continuance becomes nourishment, their absence the thirst of someone used to water," as Brown has it. Kevin Killian notes about the writing of the New Narrative, that it "would be unafraid of experiment, unafraid of kitsch, unafraid of sex and gossip and political debate." And this book has all of that and more.

In *Top 40,* perceptive ideas about pop music will alternate with mundane events like taking a bath, or smoking a joint. Rihanna will spar with Theodor Adorno, and show herself the better intellect, with more to say about the human heart. Here's Brown, comparing the song "Stay" by Rihanna featuring Mikky Ekko with "Closer" by Tegan and Sarah: "I like Rihanna's tenderness in *Stay* // Like *Closer,* it is all about the desire for prolonged intimacy, but the discursive demand is softer. // It's not a command, but a hortatory expression of desire. // The difference between the imperative and the hortatory is figured in two of pop's most important tropes: 'Let's Go' (hortatory) and 'Come On' (imperative)." He goes on to compare the ethical imperative of Alain Badiou and Rihanna's erotic hortatory, siding with the complexity of Rihanna's emotional expression: "But *Stay* is also sung out of a melancholic trough allergic to permeation by light, what kind of love is it that we find there?" Brandon is clearly on the side of more complex expressions of feeling which he finds in pop music.

And what about American foreign policy? Bonnie Mckee for President anyone? Who's she, you ask? Stop reading this essay now and go on YouTube and listen to Mckee sing "American Girl." The song's basically about an American girl who wants to dominate and take over the world. Brandon Brown writes:

> In theory I would support Bonnie Mckee becoming a sovereign dictator over the whole world, but the platform she adumbrates in *American Girl,* sensory deprival and extravagant competition, seems too much like the old world of dicks … *American Girl* ecstatically reifies US foreign policy, infantile but no less terrifying, like a baby with a hot iron walking around, super cute but like *super* fucked up … She's okay with being the monstrous child, "I never listen to mommy / I never say that I'm sorry."

Take out the part about being cute and switch genders and you have a perfect portrait of Donald Trump! The following is an exchange which takes on new meaning in Trump's America:

> This afternoon I was talking to an acquaintance who said she was thinking about moving to a new neighborhood. // I said well what are you looking for in a neighborhood? // She said that she wanted to be around her age peers, be within walking distance to bars and boutiques, and to live in a place 'where white people lived.' I made like a 'I'm gonna throw up' face.

Interesting that things don't seem to change in America. *Top 40* was published in 2014. These days, with the rise of the Right we see nationalism given a new face in America; racism, bigotry, attacks on the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, and rampant corruption in the White House are all on the rise. Right and alt-right figures like Lauren Southern, Richard Spencer, Jordan Peterson, and Ben Shapiro are the new faces on social media, representing hate against all those who are not white or European, male, or adhering to Judeo-Christian values, with particularly vicious attacks against those of the Islamic faith. And of course, Fox News. And this is where pop music becomes important:

> Some say pop precisely fails to reflect the miserable condition of the real world, is instead a collection of highly addictive distractions, candied loops that desensitize its adherents to the stifling devastation of the world pop traffics in and which it helps to make…. They deduce from this thought that the popwork is an unsuitable political object, debilitating to the present imperatives of resistance…. But I dunno. People really love to sing together, voices variously blended and distinct…. Poetry has always hearkened to a rhythmic demand that produces unmanageable excess, images too big to fit a sheet of molded glass or hustling hexameter.

But then there's Brown's reality check: "When I look in the mirror I'm subject to a number of fantasies about history and time travel." We must never give up but it isn't going to be easy.

Speaking of Justin Timberlake's "Take Back The Night," Brown writes:

> So many of the songs in America's Top 40 are obsessed with the night…. Not just the night as such, the time long obsessed over in the West, in which darkness permits previously impossible modes of privacy, freedom, perversions, but the night as a militarized opportunity which must *not be squandered*.

Brown's focus is pop music, but while reading his riffs on "Take Back The Night," I remember all those late nights in the clubs in New York and New Jersey. I remember late at night before "last call," when everyone would fill the dance floor, and I'd see all those arms and faces and legs, all together forming a colorful mass of sweating flesh, which I joined in eventually, all of us in unison silently hoping the night would never end. We were working class kids, seeking experiences in the night, that might make the day more bearable. Sure, in some ways it was a fool's game. But that didn't matter. If only the energy of these bodies could be harnessed for political purposes. It's during the day, when we're at work, that we feel separate from each other; at night, we shed that façade, and "squirm in unison until dawn." I remember afterwards going with friends to White Castle at four in the morning and seeing all the club people, probably drunk with their girlfriends. I remember coming home when the sun was rising and collapsing onto my bed. But it was worth it "because the night is the metabolic diamond of time, it is the jewel bosses covet."

> Our obedience to bosses includes the way we rest our bodies…. Alli and I slept in for most of the morning, a cruel metonymic luxury representing the free time enjoyed by the rulers of this world and those they permit to rest…. The extra two hours we slept in were like whole years in the life of Wordsworth, while he walked around Wales freaked out about the sudden appearance of a full moon on a leafy dale or whatever…. Laziness is the sole residual fragment of paradise.

Waking up after a night out was a kind of paradise. I didn't do anything, maybe read for a bit, talked on the phone with friends. But I remember all those anonymous faces in the dark of a nightclub on the dance floor. How we all felt riding the waves of sound. There was unity in that "glitterlight." We had been released into the world: "We who are arraigned must find each other, even if the only light is glitterlight. SPACE We must find each other, and we must take back the night (and the day.)"

Macklemore opines in the song "Same Love" that he thought he was gay, like his uncle, when he was a kid, because he could draw and kept his room clean. His mother assures him that he loved sports so he couldn't be gay, which causes Macklemore to devote the rest of the song to stereotypes about being gay, and to assure his listeners that "God loves all his children." The song prompts Brown to write:

> After listening to *Same Love* dozens of times, he still just sounds like a smug liberal prick, sooo satisfied with his own expansive tolerance…. But I do wonder if my powerful instinct to reject Macklemore and all things macklemorean is due to a suspicion that we are perhaps alike, he and I…. I'm not a Macklemore to myself, but perhaps to others my actually existing solidarity appears hollow…. Fuck, you guys I am really feeling it!…. We also have similar haircuts…. I guess I don't know for sure what solidarity is…. Maybe solidarity is like friendship, always in dispute until the moment in which it either has to be true or false.

Progressive neoliberals do tend to appear smug, and self-satisfied, at times, when speaking about tolerance. I mean in terms of their respective private lives, are they really so different from the Right, in an economic sense, concerned with lining their pockets with money stolen from the tax-paying public. Though the intonation may be different if a neoliberal is speaking as opposed to someone on the Right, does this sentence make any real sense: We are for the people? Who are these people, surely

not the poor? The wealth does not trickle down, it rises up. Everyone knows that, though I guess it feels better for some to associate themselves with the rich corporations (even if you've got an EBT card, you hope no one at the supermarket notices, because after all, maybe then they'll think you have money) and have faith (support Trump) that they're good for the country and that the reason things are in shambles is really because of immigrants. This is a world of ideologues not intellectuals, not in the sense that we could speak of the Left in the '70s, when public intellectuals debated the issues. Instead, we have snake oil salesmen on the Right parading as public intellectuals, spewing half-baked, if not downright racist and homophobic, ideas on social media. Everyone is in on the game. Except if you're poor, then things don't change. It bears listening to Tony Duvert, from his book *Diary of an Innocent*:

> Money decides between the two…. Unless you subscribe to "the fringe," which I can't bring myself to do. It means rejoining the same world by another door. Middle-class hangers-on in beards and worn dungarees disgust and repel me in the same way that their kinsmen in ties and cars do. A different style of speech, ideas that are against the grain, different threads equal the same civilization, limits, dependencies, pretenses. Frankly I'd rather be a nasty, puritanical, self-satisfied, imbecilic, withdrawn, hypocritical, despotic, intolerant, marriage-advocating, illiterate, sunken-eyed, deaf-as-a-doornail flabby-mouth than be all of it with a coating of libertarian mega-bullshit. Besides, one side is just as oppressive to me as the other. Whether it comes from clean-shaven faces, whose treasures don't impress me enough, or from pious mugs.

Brandon Brown's *Top 40* is a book to read again and again, savoring its witty and brilliant analysis of pop music, along with his observations of daily life. I'm reminded of the importance of music in one's life. I remember going to Tower Records in New York and buying new wave records, the excitement that

involved. Listening to the radio to get hip to the newest songs. Sharing records with friends, getting into heated discussions about The Smiths or New Order, etc. But not until I started listening to the free improvisation, that was coming out of England and Germany in the '70s, did I think about the politics of music, where I read things like the following by the musician, Steven Hicks:

> It may be that opponents and supporters of improvisation are defined by their attitude towards the fact that improvisation embraces, even celebrates, music's essentially ephemeral nature. For many of the people involved in it, one of the enduring attractions of improvisation is its momentary existence: the absence of a residual document.

Many of these musicians were against recording their music and turning the music into created objects for the museum, allowing consumers to stockpile use-value. Brandon Brown's Top 40 shows that pop music can be used as a political tool, and prompt a reader, like myself, into imagining ways in which music can lead to reflections about politics and sexuality. In conclusion, here is Brown on melody:

> "Sophisticated" derives from the Greek word saphos, meaning "wise," but Sophos too was a way of simply saying "melody" in Ancient Greece…. Some think pop music is a desiccated shucked husk, a thanatic façade for the violence of finance, but I remember that our philosophical tradition began with the thought that melody was wise.

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22

I Did It for the Enduring Light

On Alli Warren's *I Love It Though* (Nightboat Books, 2017)

> so we launch attacks
> against the regime
> of ossification

In her recent book of poetry, *I Love It Though,* Alli Warren sees the world through the eyes of a skeptic as she explores the nature of desire and the sublime in terms of our present world.[1] Desire that points to a utopic vision of an alternate world is often compromised by cultural and ideological factors. Pleasure is often tainted by class, power plays, and gender wars. We are a product of our time and there is no escaping that. She says in an interview with Dustan Pearson published in *The Coil Magazine* on July 16, 2018:

> I don't think there's any unadulterated, natural, or authentic self where desire is pure. The poems deal with this entanglement, and yet they are not free from a utopian, impos-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Social Text* online, 2020.

sible wish to (re)gain access to some form where feeling and meaning are simple and clear.

She knows that longing and the poet's art of listening have an ethics all their own and so her writing gives her sustenance and strength to navigate the complex realities of our time so beset by racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Desire is complicated and in retaining that complexity in her work, Warren gives it the sense of a life in the process of living, a mind moving in the language and critiquing the world on its own terms. Instead of easy answers, she complicates the questions when thinking of alternatives to this world, something that the poem gives voice to, and thus can embody. It's a real world she's speaking of even though you can only feel it. Longing is stronger than control. It is open-ended and resists closure and finality. The invisible nurtures the poet because what is visible is subject to definition, categorization, manipulation, and decay. Her vision of the world is one of "revelation instead of simple clarity."

In the first poem in the book, "A Yielding Hole For Light," she writes:

I tell BB what I want around me
are the ripe and tender ones
wine the color of weather
the lush bearing of our longing
going on in my way, stupidly sincere
one foot in the office the other lolling
about the field, do you prefer the gravel
to the scrub grass? I prefer the ear
to the throat, calling choice
what's ancient
.....
I want to be able to continue
to love to stay alive
the epigraph belongs to Gloria Gaynor
the green pervades, it's a diamond, we all are

It's a poem that sets the tone for the entire book. In the title, a "hole" is something complete, defined, circumscribed. The word also suggests a kind of void or tear in the fabric of reality; "yielding" suggests giving over to pressure, not hard or rigid. This is the fluidity necessary for the light to pass through: a moment of enlightenment produced by a rupture in the present system of thought, which allows for new ideas to flow. This gives rise to the sense of pervading green (suggesting nature, renewal), and Warren also speaks of a "diamond" that we all are; the diamond suggests strength, courage, fortitude, creativity, as well as love and fidelity. And yet the word green is also simply the color green as the diamond is just a diamond. What I mean is that in Warren's poetry the material qualities of the language also contain that which is beyond the language; the spirit is in the material. In the poem, the mention of Gloria Gayner is a reference to the poet Brandon Brown's (BB in the poem) book *Top 40,* a marvelous deconstruction of pop music as a political tool. She speaks of the "courage" of "me and my friends / orbital in lilt." "Orbital in lilt" suggests a motion that is not stationary but rises and falls like a voice or cadence or measure, like the poem. The "orbit" yields to the measure of song. The fixed motion leads to a motion that is unstable, in flux. Perhaps "orbital" also refers to the sense of being intoxicated and having a good time while the room is spinning! Nevertheless, the song or poem is a light emerging from the darkness. In the poem, Warren asks, "Do you prefer the gravel / to the scrub grass?" She answers, "I prefer the ear / to the throat." Scrub grass is coarse and uncultivated grass while gravel is a loose cluster of pounded stones. Gravel also suggests "graveled," meaning angry or annoyed. The uncultivated and coarse is not bound by ideology or patriarchy, or conventional forms of speech or thought; the gravel is hard from being pounded into submission. She responds to the question in the poem by saying that the ear is preferable to the throat. She speaks in another poem of the "ethics of listening." Listening is being receptive to the sounds in the world, to natural sounds as well as human language. It is open ended and requires concentration. The "throat," by contrast, suggests speech, human

language. It also suggests the finality of the written word, and the false stability that it promises. Listening is unstable, fluid, subject to "errors" or "mishearings" and noise. This is the difference between field recordings and polished studio recordings, the difference between low fi and high fi. It is finally a way of being open in the world:

> to resist enclosure
> and the loaded laying down
> of structure on soft earth
>
> as desire can never perish
> blind in the rush of weeds
> Trying to get a glimpse
>
> of the law
> falling away
> and in passing breathing lift

In "Palpating the Scar" Warren speaks of "brimming at the limit oozing / hole where the heart should be." Here is the idea of hole as void again, as painful absence, or lack. She speaks of "they" which suggests a solidarity with her friends who all suffer from a common ailment in the present world system. She speaks of "all the usual palliatives": This suggests all the false cures which are unable fix the wound in the usual manner given our present society. The "suffering" is spoken of as a "musk of indecision"; indecisiveness is like a perfume with a strong odor, fluid, unstable, unbound like the air it inhabits. And just as fleeting. One thinks of the status of immigrants in our present time, the sense of hopelessness, the inability to effect a change in their circumstances. It is an emotion that can also effect a poet. She writes about the vow to be

> fungible that whole
> biorhythm thing
> as long as it rings

could a polity
would a

Here she imagines an alternate political space, but her thinking balks at the finish line and she changes direction into a kind of metaphysical space. "Fungible" is the exchangeable nature of goods with equal value, and biorhythm is a cyclical pattern in the emotional or physical life of a person. Here in the poem a space is opened where things are bartered for and where our emotional and physical life obeys a cyclical process like nature. "Rings" suggests surrounding, embracing, circling, or a sound. I also hear "ring true." But rings can also suggest a rising in the air. Warren's idea of this political space is one that essentially obeys natural processes. To this extent it is pagan in the sense that it precedes the idea of civilization. It is an older way of seeing the world and more primitive. But then the next line after "could a polity" trails off. Warren is unable to reach a conclusion, or articulate what, in some respects, must remain *unsaid*: "I sing of something that cannot speak its name / though its signature is everywhere / Of sentimental feeling / and immaculate behavior." Up to this point, the language of the poem is that of government and finance: "Indeed how much gold / bespoke the rope / we dangle from" and "the loot's the problem." The poem is left with the auxiliary verbs "could" and "would" hanging on the edge of a visible world. The next lines suggest a visionary moment:

I like the look of light
on moss its rank
inability to oath
those who persist
in entering breach

The light is transgressive. "Oath" acts as a verb, and the poem suggests that the "light" does not enforce an oath upon "those who persist / in entering" and "breach." "Those" are her friends

and all those who persist in "breaking the law" of convention in terms of lifestyle and sensibility. They are creating a "hole" in the fabric of reality through which a light can pass. In this poem, the poet diagnoses the scar born of desire, both in terms of love, and in terms of the desire for a new world, a new form of government. In "Total Vocation" she writes:

> O malleable heart
> O irreducible cement
> I am left-footed in deliberation
> in domination's lusty grip
> clamoring for enlargement of the spheres
> The indication on the outside
> represents the tokens on the inside
> Sound only exists as it is going out of existence

This poem sets up an oppositional force which increases its tension: "malleable heart" and "irreducible cement," "left-footed in determination" and "in domination's lusty grip." Line four is complicated by the word "lusty," which suggests erotic submission. She is "clamoring for enlargement of the spheres": enlarging the world view to included alternate ideas. In this respect, "Total Vocation" resonates with "Palpating the Scar." But in shouting loudly and insistently for change, the poet and her friends realize that the inside dangerously mirrors the outside. We end up acting like our oppressors. And the poem concludes with the elegiac line: "Sound only exists as it is going out of existence." Just as in "Palpating the Scar" the sound trails off, in imaging an alternate world, into empty space. But this inability to embody the alternate world in the present is a failure which generates longing for that which *does exist* in the invisible, in the unrealized, where possibilities remain open. But the point when sound is "going out of existence" is also when it is most present, most unstable. In "Our Portrait Exceeds Us" she writes: "once something will come / from the world, it just appears / from nowhere." But Warren also realizes that revolutionary

ideas against the present world system are perhaps just part of the local lore:

> We want the morning
> of unstructured grace
> parted lips and northern lights
> to harness the force
> of a thousand layings on
> a gaping mouth
> of no market purpose
> walking blind
> out into the road
> toward the end of this world-system
> or is that just
> local lore?

She complicates any sense of easy answers. This is the skeptic in her, and it also reflects an inner strength to face reality on its own terms.

In the poem "In the Craving Night," she writes: "In school they'll teach you / to map gridlines & build hedges / to mark this land for grazing / and that land for razing / In school they'll teach you / the world's not made of words." A running theme throughout *I Love It Though* concerns the way in which we are taught to categorize, define, map, bind, and thus limit our views of the world. It is a problem that rests on our ideas of education. Warren continues: "but greet this hole / born of sound / bigger than circumstance." The ability to speak and write makes us aware of the limits of language, of how language fails to represent our desires, and it is this lack, this hole (or void) that produces longing. She desires "the order of the clouds," and "the animated world of love in her youth." Her idea of order is fluid, and changeable, like her idea of a youthful love, rather than rigid. Warren desires "a collective wilding" that "tongues the trunk," suggesting an erotic and linguistic relation to the natural world, which she sees as a revolutionary act. In "On the Levelers Everyday," she also speaks of revolution in the public sphere

with a wink: "Let's loot the establishments / I mean feed each other." And it is this revolutionary desire that is at the center of the following lines from "Slantwise on the Skyline":

> I want to be sucked up into the air and released
> Without raiment or kirtle
> With strings in accord
> With what exceeds us

But the skeptic in her realizes that such desire is not pure but tainted by ideology, gender relations, and power plays. All of which act as external noise:

> as an ear's for
> tonguing the open out
> an ear's for breathing
> engine of thought
> knowing what
> listens won't die
> but it's hard to hear
> it's hard to hear

The line "Sound only exists as it is going out of existence" takes on additional meaning here. Paradoxically, the unsaid, or unheard, does *exist* in an alternate space, in the invisible, and does not die, which is why listening is so important. What *exists* comes to the poet in the form of a poem from the outside. It nurtures the poet and gives her strength to cope. And her skeptical nature keeps her on her toes.

Alli Warren's *I Love It Though* is a subtle and complex work that rewards repeated readings. Desire and love are complicated by current gender issues, class systems, and problems with control and domination, all of which taint and complicate pleasure: "Where is the net which saves / rather than traps." The following is from her interview with Lauren Levin, published on May 25, 2017, in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*:

> I can't think of a post-capitalist world without considering the relationship of violence and domination to eros and eroticism, to coupling and ownership. I want my poems to hold that complication, to express embodiment, sensuality, and physical desire without simplifying my relationship to sexuality, which feels social, cultural.

But it is this desire for an alternate world, and the discussions it gives rise to, that produces in her and her friends the sustenance and inner strength to deal with the daily pressures of living under the present world system, where they suffer "in relation to each other because … of the ways class, race, gender, etc., are oppressively organized." Warren complicates the contemporary discourse while maintaining the resulting tension; this gives her poems the feeling of a life being lived in the present. *I Love It Though* is exactly the kind of book we need these days so that we can see clearly in the gathering dark. Alli Warren is a poet I'd trust to lead us through "the polar night unscathed."

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23

On Will Alexander's *The Combustion Cycle* (Roof Books, 2021)

Will Alexander's epic *The Combustion Cycle* is composed of three parts: "Concerning the Henbane Bird," "On Solar Physiology," and "The Ganges."[1] Throughout the book, he envisions a cosmos that is ever expanding and contracting, exploding and imploding: "I detonate & disperse / always able to reconfigure." The shape-shifting "I" is both local and cosmic; it navigates the terrain of this magical universe in which time and space are unstable, and where consciousness leaks into the world, assuming the shape of plants, animals, gods, objects, chemicals, lakes. This is a kind of roving spirit, seeking to assume alternate shapes to mount a defense against mechanized reason which infects the human with its arbitrary laws, and threatens ultimately to create boundaries on the limitless expansion of the self. Alexander prefers to "fly throughout the mount of the largest 'inner planet.'" The physical body is at once substance and nothingness, since there is no separation between the vast regions of space and the inner abyss of the human self. For this reason, everything that appears to limit *potentia,* to create borders, foundations, walls,

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Restless Messengers,* 2021.

between the self and the world, as if they were distinct, is considered a manifestation of evil.

Alexander seeks to go beyond duality, that which creates anxiety, depression, neurosis, and like a shaman, to destabilize the self, as a way of unifying with god. In this, the shaman must ingest poisons, ingest the negativity of the world, and like the alchemist, transform this into the gold of infinite wisdom. He does so by "shamanically defying gravity / by weaving frequencies / & archetypes / & patterns." But Alexander emphasizes throughout the epic that this wisdom is not that of the Greeks or Romans, not that of the positivist thinkers of the modern world. It is a wisdom that, in one sense, is not final, or fixed, but also not arbitrary; it is equal to nothingness but at the same time it is everything. It is multiple but singular, a dissolution of the world, in favor of a world that is transformed, no longer framed in terms of a Western bias.

For Alexander, it is the dominance of a rationalizing mind that reached its apex in René Descartes's famous "cogito erg sum." Alexander shifts the emphasis from the mind (thought) to sound (hearing); hearing because seeing is limited and bound to frame the world in one sense or another. Often in the epic, Alexander speaks of "blindness"; to close off the mind, the biased perception, is to achieve an inner awareness where one is better able to hear the music of the spheres, that which is sounding in the depths of one's consciousness. And of course, it is within us that these spheres, these suns, this solar power, exists. Alexander is a navigator of the solar system. He is attentive to the minute composition of immediate environments; he floats,

> between the forms which exist between primal
> elephant & camel
> between
> black rhino & penguin
> being heliotropic wave
> as strategic self-allegiance
> alive
> in the heliosphere

in part as enigmatic menagerie

Furthermore, he writes: "I am part of the Heliomasters / of the sun angels / of the vervet thrushes / singing with the acuity of ventricular / illumination." Alexander uses a coined word, "transmatics," which he defines as "the nervous system infiltrated by signals whose origin remains akin to the intelligence that fuels our collective stellar system." The objective and subjective form a continuity, defined by each other. Furthermore, the star Ankaa is "an Orange giant 93 light years away that enhances the absorption of minerals and food in the physical body." Thus, the solar system affects the human body. These words are from the section of the book called "On Solar Physiology." The god who personified the sun was one of the most important and widely venerated of Egypt's deities. Re was considered a demiurge, or creator god, who brought himself and the rest of the pantheon into being at the beginning of time. Although syncretism is a characteristic of the Egyptian religion as a whole, Re seems to have possessed this power in a unique way. He is the first god for whom this kind of "shape-shifting" can be seen; he was able to take multiple forms and meld with other members of the pantheon more than any other god. For, Alexander writes of "the human Sun in movement / beyond its dark agonal needs / hurtling to a post-material matrix / in order to fish in an unknown current / as multi-dimensional grasp forming into being." The thrust of this epic poem is away from a materialist world towards the world of the spiritual, which is not bound by the physical body. A human sun merges "in a state of harmonics." This movement is described not in terms of the physical but in terms of sound: A hearing is involved in the movement of the human sun, in the physiology conceived of as solar.

Alternately, there is a different kind of seeing that does not obstruct: "seeing then / becomes the living aural letter / being a lepton source / being a chromosomal ray." This kind of seeing is like a hearing. At once both cosmic and local, a function of the chromosomes and also on the scale of the quantum. Alexander speaks of "arcs of the unconfigurable." This image can only be

felt rather than intellectually explained. It can not be seen with the normal sight but with an alternative perception, which is not bound by the obsessive desire to represent reality, to give it shape and form as proof of its existence. He writes:

> I suggest the scope of quantum proto-living
> with its heavens
> spiraling
> out of deluge after deluge
> being arcs of the unconfigurable
> darting
> & moving
> like a drawing which blazes as spellbinding bones

In the quantum universe subatomic particles can be at two locations simultaneously. In one location the particle can be said not to exist; in the other their existence can be confirmed. So that a single subatomic particle can both exist and not exist at the same time. This excerpt suggests a way of living that is beyond what we understand as human biology: Alexander writes about "always singing at a post human frequency"; it is a life that practices "evolvement through concealment"; it is to say without saying; and it is to understand "the gulf between being & not being / between dissonance & and its ongoing dissonance." It is "living at the source of the unmeasurable."

But there is also a higher form of "logistics," that which is a function not of the thinking, rational mind but the subconscious. A psychic need, it is "something much deeper than harried perceptual givens." The subjective and objective, as distinct ideas, are limiting conceptions that reduce the stature of the human. A vast gulf, an abyss, creates an unfathomable bridge between humankind and their world, what they see and what is: "all fragmentary beings / can pronounce my cells / as being at the core of unliving," but there are those beings whose "sole concentration" is "limited to outer appearance." The outer appearance can be framed, is perceived as fragmentary, a function of the human organs, which is distinct from the consciousness,

which is without limit; this is an inner awareness that one is not separate from the world. This limited view of the outward appearance, reduced to the color of skin, is what is responsible for racist views, which is a main subject of the section called "The Ganges," which involves an attack on the slave trade in Portugal.

The acknowledgement of the Eastern influence upon the West was repressed over time as a result of racist ideas during the colonial period. The West was seen as the home of rational positivism and the East as mystical and irrational, thus inferior and superstitious. When Percy Shelley writes, "We are all Greeks," he specifically means the West, the Greco-Roman culture. In the West, the Greco-Roman civilization has been seen as the result of the colonial project, as the culture solely responsible for the origin of civilization, and thus superior to all other cultures. In 1786, at the height of the colonial period, there was a man named Sir William Jones, who gave a lecture in which he stated that Sanskrit was an Indo-European language. This struck at the heart of the British agenda. If Sanskrit was understood to be the oldest of the Indo-European languages, that would topple the supremacy of a Western linguistic bias. But his views were ignored. For Alexander, "a crowned Osirian scarlet" is "more evolved than the lesser flames / brewing in the hatcheries of Venus."

Alexander writes of Earth as an "entombed zone // as an old monaural trapping gaze." Furthermore, Alexander writes: "I rise & foretell … jeopardizing plot / inventing the West as derided event." This is visionary language, a belief that words can enact change. More importantly, Alexander is interested in occult sources, alternative streams of knowledge, often derided and repressed in history, rather than accepting as inevitable the positivist notions of the West, which have rationalized colonialism, racism, and slavery. It is these Western concepts that cause the speaker in this epic poem to be seen "as dreadful lower form / to be turned in my grave & drowned / my corpse / then drifting as lost / as if formed by lack of intrinsic mentality … condemning

my lot to self-treachery & boundary." This boundary was often a literal jail or camp for those who thought on the margins of Western society. But this is also a metaphysical boundary which seeks to limit the *potentia* of the self. Alexander is concerned with "other frequencies … far beyond the mind as we know it."

In *The Combustion Cycle,* Alexander's tone is argumentative, self-questioning. Through his vocal orchestrations, he seeks to destabilize the rationalizing impulse which limits expression of the self. Or more importantly, limits the ability of the I to shape-shift and assume different aspects and voices: "I would know myself … flitting in & out of forms / as general mystery to myself." Refusing to understand the self as lack, via Jacques Lacan, or to seek wisdom in order to dominate others, Alexander writes: "I remain manifold / elusive / eclectic in the vastitudes." When a thought is fixed it becomes dominant, unalterable; in motion, thought becomes fluid, constantly shifting into new spaces of inner perception. The third eye opens when the human eyes are closed.

For Alexander, "death" is a "stationary flux as industry," an argument against "lucid theatrics." Furthermore, he writes:

> I exist as differing pressures
> & pressures of pressures
> creating scatterings & phases & unreasons
> living beyond death
> beyond the point of a fixed obstruction
> where realia shifts & blinds & disintegrates

The Multiple is absorbed into the One. *Solve et coagula* was the secret formula of the alchemists; the phrase means to dissolve and coagulate. For them the multiple was constantly shifting, becoming unified in order to dissolve. In the Kaballistic formula, 0 = 2, the 2 is the duality emerging from the 0, nothingness. But multiplicity and singularity are one and the same, revealing and concealing the nature of things:

> I can say

there is the one substance
the one performing principle
which blazes
which spins
through spiraling
stellar confinement
as an nth of an nth of an nth

The shaman exists in a fluid state, between life and death, dissolution and coagulation. They are that "which empties & reconjugates / as shamanistic interjacence … between itself as bird / & illusive witness on this plane." "Reconjugates" suggests a linguistic operation which changes the nature of reality, which reminds me of Jack Spicer's comment in *Morphemics,* that if "moon" "were spelled 'mune' it would not cause madness." The poet is hummingbird, lizard, shark, yak. There are planes of experience where the rational mind can never navigate, bound as it is by the material, rational world:

they cannot know
that I breathe inside the Sun
that I exist as a-particulate ray
as ferment
as occulted hydrogen
as fervid helium spring
as bird

In the astral plane, one takes on different shapes, can even become invisible, or take on the shape of water, sky, or objects. Alexander writes: "I am speaking of the bottomless / of the nth dimension / of life."

In *The Combustion Cycle,* Will Alexander shortcuts rational cognition, takes you someplace else. The sonic variables in each line are not fixed but serve as points of departure for different sounds. In one of the quotes in the beginning of the book, Alexander writes, "Absolute fearlessness is required, / because at every step, at every second, / you must wage war against every-

thing / that is established." He is against the rationalizing mind in the West, the Big Intellectual Machine, that mechanizes and limits the freedom of man. For him, the Sonic Machine is breaking apart, reprogrammed into a new, alien idiom. His vivid, resonant music opens passages into inner space: "a stellar but classic reason." A pattern stirs in the static; a breach is open; and signals shimmer at the edge of perception.

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24

Poesis of Sweet Disorder

On Adeena Karasick's *Salomé: A Woman of Valor* (University of Padua Press, 2017)

Where are you, my labyrinth?
in the glut of labored fancy
in the ostinato of sated marvel

Flagrantly stained am I!

The night after reading Adeena Karasick's *Salomé: Woman of Valor* I dreamt of a body, of indeterminate sex, made out of letters.[1] In essence, Karasick's language is somatic; it is a language that you can taste on your lips and it is a strange and wonderful elixir. It is wild, fierce, erotic; it plays with many masks, wears many costumes, and is theatrical. The language assumes various registers, and the text includes provocative images. What emerges in the text is Salomé, herself, dominant, submissive, transgressive, sexually liberated, and finally, both absent and present in the language, imminent. Salomé, in the text, func-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2017.

tions as both the liberator of the patriarchal or phallocentric Sign, a kind of tonic injected into the language, and as a woman free from false Christian interpretations that paint her in a negative light:

> Throughout Christian tradition, Salomé has been tagged as an evil murderess notorious for beheading St. John the Baptist. With phallocentric fervor, she has been serially exploited by Gustave Flaubert, Charles Bryant, Oscar Wilde, Richard Strauss, forever entrenching her in social consciousness, as a dangerous woman, a praying mantis who cannibalizes the head of her lover. Here, Salomé who descended from Jewish Royalty, (the daughter of Herodias and stepdaughter of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee), is not appraised as a villain, but hailed a hero — a freedom fighter … [who] rejoices in her sexuality, in transgressive passion and female eroticism.

The beheading of John the Baptist is seen as the separation of the head from the body that "pays homage to the Kabbalistic notion of the separation of the primordial letters." The letters are separated from their source, "the words are separated from their meaning." Furthermore, the separation suggests an absence, and from this absence is born multiplicity. In the separation from what is below or above, according to the Zohar, there exists the "unformed, re-formed, visible, invisible." In the image that accompanies these reflections, Karasick repeats the phrase "Give Me Head," a play on words, conflating the beheading with a sexual provocation. It is this playfulness that also informs the poems. Furthermore, "The only historical reference that Herodias' daughter's name was 'Salomé' is from Flavius Josephus who makes no other claims about her," and thus she is the *Unnamed*. She "embodies all that is perfect, imperfect and reaching towards — And like *Shulamit* in *Shir ha Shirim* (The Song of Songs), she *is* the incarnation of desire." And this text embodies desire, feminine desire.

Karasick's language is dense, multivocal, constantly shifting between words normally associated with linguistics and a lyri-

cism that resembles camp. In this she employs both high art and low art, creating a fierce hybrid surface to the poems that resists rational interpretation and remains unapologetically open-ended. The words bend to desires that almost resist articulation since they resound so deep inside the poem, but in order to do so, the language becomes fluid, gathering momentum in each line. Rising to a kind of orgasmic frenzy, the language attains a red hot intensity in its movement. Signs are stripped bare of their traditional meanings and reclothed in language more elaborate, baroque even; the language performs in drag. It is both abstract and vivid, but, remember, the mind is separated from the body, so the language is physical, pulsing, the word dancing in the flesh. An example:

> So, just kiss me, fruity magnitude
> in the portals of
> frisson; Kiss me purring
> through the pursed posits of scented nests
>
> in the curled mirth
>
> suspended in the flickering ardor
>
> where lines flower, opening like soft combat
> And prim cognates unfold
>
> There among lacy congress I will give you
> in the musk of virulent surfaces
> I will fan our daring plied with
> tempests, pageantries.
>
> Savored in the hungry hubris of enflamed rigor.

In the first three lines that end with the word "frisson," we are in a space of erotic intensity, but the passion is directed towards a "magnitude," not necessarily a single person. The spiritual is

eroticized, in essence; this is a pagan spirituality. She speaks of the "flickering ardor" of desire unknown, perhaps unrealized, yet forceful, "where the lines flower, opening like soft combat / and prim cognates unfold." The use of the word, "prim," suggests a stuffy academic approach and an unwillingness to accept new ideas and yet, they finally yield their secrets: Karasick examines the etymological origins of the word Salomé and reveals that, in "Hebrew, Salomé is *Shulamit,* from *Shalom*: peace, fulfillment; *Shlemut*: completion, perfection." Here is the poet as scholar, able to strip off the layers of false meaning that have accrued and obscured the reality of Salomé; she tears apart the script. She writes, "I will fan our daring plied with / tempests, pageantries." This is not about "soft combat": The relation between the sexes has never been that simple. Tempests are on the horizon in this feminist text but also pageantries, both in the sense of elaborate costumes and pomp as well as surface display, the mode of camp. But tempest is also a word that implies a violent disturbance. The old world must crumble to the ground in order for a new world to be born. We are very much in the world of the Kabbalah, of creation through destruction. Various realities are present simultaneously in Karasick's poetry: linguistic, lyrical, and mystical realities weave to form the elaborate mosaic of this poetry.

But the body of Salomé in this poetry is finally unnamable and imminent. This is not a poetry of finality, or conclusion, or even of manifestation in the sense of the "holy presence" of an authoritative figure. She is incipient, hovering, even haunting this language; she is a specter rather than a pure physical presence. She is stained by all that has been attached to her, and in this impurity she retains all her power, not being reducible to a single, confining Sign. Rather, she is constantly in motion, undulating as an erotic specter in the space between the words. She is an "imminence" that is, finally, "inhabitable" in the language, through the spell Karasick is able to weave. Karasick writes:

> Suffer me to touch thy body. Thy body is historical like the body of a lapsed eloper. Like a festering will of vaporous quills; like a palace of scrawled carousels. It is inhabitable; thy body humming with harrowed imminence; parsed like the clusters of fractalled gaps wrapped like the cinders of aberrance.
>
> Like a crown of torn placards; a knot of uncertainty coiled in the gardens of eros. Fêted with gilded triggers, your body like a branch of echoic clusters that phishers have found in the twilight of caesurae! scattered in the mines of ebullient looms which lines the brow of clanging puissance tainted with malleable tales
>
> nested with buttered longing
> and parsed in the spectre
>
> of glistening iterates
>
> a lexical elixir.

The figure of Salomé that has come down to us from the word of Christian historians is a "knot of uncertainty in the gardens of eros," who can be located in the "glistening iterates / a lexical elixir." She appears in the dark of language and is realized alchemically when it gives up its historical meanings to embrace the complex threads of meaning without resolution. She is a "body humming with harrowed imminence; parsed like the clusters of fractalled gaps wrapped like the cinders of aberrance." She is found in the random gaps of the historical record. She is the errata, the erased, the repressed, hinting at a transgression that cannot be accepted by the historical record. But she appears, repeatedly, in different forms throughout the record, throughout the centuries, like the flicker of a candle in the night. There is something to this poetry which resists modernity and harkens back to a time when imagination and

ecstatic experience were given more importance than science or reason; when alchemy was revered as being able to produce gold; when mysteries did not suffer reason to explain them away. The poem above is essentially about Karasick making contact with her parallel self: "Suffer me to touch thy body." She invokes Salomé in the poem, in the sound of the syllables, the pauses, the open-ended quality, and, in live performance, through the very movements of her body: sensual, erotic, playful. In this, she is like the Sufis who perform the dance which is known as sema, meaning "heard." For Karasick, "poetry is revolutionary, and is itself a 'dance' of the intellect; for Hasidim, dance is an avenue to reach G-d."

In these poems, Karasick also explodes the historical assumptions which falsified the true meaning of Salomé, and reenvisions her as a strong woman, a woman of valor. In the following poem, she doesn't do this by rejecting but by assuming the chains of these false meanings in order to defy them through abjection:

When to cut is to bind,
take me
and as you come
to the tenet of my house. In the bed that is
spread across this lexicon
bind me

in the splendor of our haunting

bind me to your wrists
to your forearms, your fingers

bind me
with your leather strapped
heritage histories rituals traditions

bind me
with your tableaux fabliaux

of ragged madness
aberrance, labyrinths

bind me
in prophecy, sophistry
as i taste you
all palistrophically erotic and
threaded with hysteria

bind me to your doorposts bedposts

For in my death i taste you
with the paradox of worship.

Salomé welcomes the "leather strapped / heritage histories rituals traditions" as well as the "ragged madness / aberrance, labyrinths." Indeed, this language is labyrinthine; her poetry is like a complex mosaic. She wishes to be bound "in prophecy, sophistry … threaded with hysteria," a term that refers to the nineteenth-century diagnosis of women who exhibited signs of not conforming to the rules of society. Getting down to basics, Karasick unearths the substrata of reality that creates the underlying conditions of female oppression. And "in my death i taste you / with the paradox of worship." She uses the invented word, "palistrophically" which contains "palistrophe," a literary technique in textual passages, and describes it as erotic. Here language is made strange, bent to serve the imagination, and to create a relation to language as a kind of erotic body to be touched or licked, savored for its essence. She wants to be bound "in the bed that is spread across the lexicon." The language is where she consummates her desire. It is the bed on which she enacts her transgressions, her desires, her loves. She writes: "you will find me along the path of the letters / ripe with the conspiratorial architecture of moist reverence." Salomé, "is quickening her pace / adjusting her grace // dancing bare-back and saddle strapped." This vivid description almost materializes her before our eyes. But then Karasick's language moves in a differ-

ent direction, speaking of "ebuliant effluvia" and "lawless philologies," concluding that "she is all headstrong / like an angel on the head of a / word that is purred." This is not the language of authority, spoken firmly to convey the strength of the laws. This is language that is "purred," feline, independent, not running with the pack, going its own way.

The language is where her imagination is liberated from cause and effect, and can exist in a time before time, a kind of eternal space; here she locates Salomé. And her reverence is not prim, or official, but "moist," suggesting fluidity, a dynamic relation to divinity, sexualized. Salomé will not kneel before any godhead in deference to authority. This bed is also the foundation of knowledge, of hermetic knowledge, the mysteries of the universe. Speaking of the "path of the letters," she is referring to the paths on the Kabbalistic tree of knowledge; the Hebrew letters do not merely signify but have alternate lives as numbers, and as actors in the drama of the Zohar and the Kabbalah. She writes : "tongue tulle tête-a-tet ט tav ט vav ו tallies, valleys, volés / stretched in moist torment all honey-dipped / as ripped script … lips yud hei vav hei's יהוה peh פ mouth tongue taste / honey-drenched torqued corps / a lettered nectar of wild honey." These lines, informed by the fluid linguistic nature of Hebrew letters, create a sensory effect in English. The words are tasted, the experience of language is somatic. The tetragrammmation יהוה is inserted, followed by peh פ, meaning word or mouth. The holy name is on the tongue, "honey drenched." This playfulness eroticizes the relation between taste and word, the language, "stretched in moist torment all honey-dipped / as ripped script." Salomé is a word, behind which stands the unutterable. Salomé is a Sign, fluid, dynamic, forming, reforming, flowering. It is a flickering light in the language; to invoke her is to stimulate the body, to raise the dead, and ultimately to dance. She is found:

in the rhythm of refusal
in the die of desire
in the rustle of prison
in the depth of immensity

in the witness of crushing history

And not in the visible language, but as if behind the words, or between them, in the palimpsest, in the "mad fragility / of erasure," in the sound. She is located on the border of meaning, at the edges of the visible, "pure vocative, non-iterable prayer."

Karasick's language play also includes references to musicians and pop songs, as she deflates pompous assumptions (the Christian historical record) about the reality of Salomé and John. John the Baptist becomes Johnny in Little Richard's iconic song, Johnny Be Good, or Johnny Thunders of the Heartbreakers, or John in David Bowie's song "John, I'm only Dancing," with the provocative lines: "John I'm only dancing / She turns me on, but I'm only dancing." Salomé becomes Sally, s[ou]lamé, and also dolly, as in "Hey Dolly," the song made famous by Louis Armstrong. The language is peppered with French words, and has a quick rhythm more like a song lyric or a heated conversation between lovers. Here are the two examples:

ride sally ride like a resale sale oh sally sally be my girl sally
mustang sally headlong agon so langue tall sally
salient alias wholesale sally down wind done gone
done rot her s[ou]lamé so lay me down sally 'n
don't slow me down with your tally sally hey dolly dolly
psalm soullier what sally say salomé slalom mal *Allez!*
    andelez salomé
holy olé salomé me softly

tallying the cadences
of aphoristic rings

And for John the Baptist:

John I'm only Dancing. Not yet Johnny, on the sloop don't
    sleep
Johnny jaunty *joue* ingénue kick a hole in the sky. *Johnny*.

Handsome Johnny Thunder Johnny Guitar Feelgood *B.*
good. Oh Johnny!
who's Johnny gens johnboy when Johnny dies. Dear John.
john jamais bon journée, nobody knows where my Johnny
goes
Big Bad Getaway St. John Johnny Angel, *come* home, *come*
back *come*-lately
jejeune jean regênte.

There is a manic energy to this writing, the sounds are so varied and unpredictable, with their own unique logic. But Johnny is *ingénue,* an unsophisticated young woman. He is also a *regênte,* which means Regent, or Empress, perhaps referring to the Tarot card, which suggests maternal influence, the creation of life, art, or romance. The image of the masculine, phallocentric male is destabilized; he is in drag in the poem. The "jean" may also suggest Jean Genet.

Sally is "headlong agon so langue tall Sally": the Greek word, *agōn,* suggests contest, conflict, not "soft combat." The phrase "langue tall Sally" could be heard as "long tall Sally," which refers to the Little Richard song, "Long Tall Sally," with the sexual suggestion in the lyrics: "Well, long tall Sally / She's built for speed / She got everything that Uncle John need." But the insertion of the word "langue," which is French for language, suggests the poem itself is in "headlong" motion: "don't slow me down with your tally sally." The tally of what? Of "the cadences / of aphoristic rings." She doesn't want to hear the high-minded aphorisms of the conventional histories. As a scholar, and cultural historian, she wants to dig below the surface of traditional meanings, stretch the boundaries of meaning in reenvisioning Salomé as a woman of valor. The two poems also express desire, the force of it, the pain of it, even the torment of love lost: "nobody knows where my Johnny goes." Sally/Salomé is the incarnation of desire, the open-ended force of it, a "poesis of sweet disorder."

Adeena Karasick's *Salome: Woman of Valor,* finally, is a powerful work of feminist criticism, that operates as a poem with the apparatus, such as footnotes, of a scholarly work. It attacks

the Christian historical record that paints a negative portrait of Salome, and as a work of poetry and visual art, creates a space for the embodiment of female desire. The language is fluid, dynamic, textually complex, dense, and multivocal. Karasick bends English to serve her purposes, not those of authority; in this, the text remains open-ended. Salome, herself, in the poem is not a fixed presence, nor even a fully visible presence but in the process of forming, reforming, multiplying. She is essentially a paradox of presence and absence. She haunts the text; she is like the perfume that lingers in the air after a woman has passed. She is a shapeshifter, simultaneously here and gone, a flicker of light in the language. And despite all this, she is vividly present in the sound. Sonically, the poem's music is polyphonic: a rich combination of English, Hebrew, and French words, which destabilizes the sole authority of English. This is an ecstatic poem that transcends the language it is speaking, for Salome stands for the *Unnamed,* that which is beyond time; thus, her name is "a hidden name, the name of the name which cannot be encapsulated or understood." She exists in the eternal space of the reader's mind. They cannot see her through the normal channels of sight. But she is there, nevertheless. *Salome: A Woman of Valor* is all the proof I need.

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25

I Collect Terms with a Hidden Symmetry

On Anna Błasiak's *Café by Wren's St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime* (Holland House Books, 2020)

Speaking of Johannes Vermeer, the British painter Trevor Winkfield writes, "And only then, if the viewer assents to the difficult task of simultaneously looking, thinking, and feeling, do Vermeer's canvases begin to parsimoniously unfold some of their true meanings, layer by layer."[1] Anna Błasiak's *Café by Wren's St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime,* is just such a book, revealing it secrets slowly: The poetry deals with memory, the nature of obsessive love and language, the mysteries of existence and the natural world, and loss. Accompanying these poems are photographs that are testament to the speed and complexity of life. Sometimes they are simply a blur of light and darkness, sometimes overwhelmingly clear: They are like a magic mirror held up to the world and complement the poems since they are

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2020.

essentially suggestive and open-ended. The first poem in the book, "Dog Catcher," can stand as a kind of poetics:

> Luckily
> in my pockets
> I always keep
> shopping receipts,
> torn newspaper clippings,
> old tickets.
>
> Otherwise so many words
> would work themselves free.

Words are as common as any human implement: a shopping receipt, or torn newspaper. The poet extracts the poem, as if from the air, from the field of language, and materializes it on the page. It is giving form to silence. Furthermore, she writes, "I collect words / in which letters are reflected mirror-like. I collect terms / with a hidden symmetry." For her, language is a mirror of the world that she seeks to read and alchemize into a whole. Like a magician, she seeks "the hidden symmetry." In the second stanza, she concludes this poem in the following way:

> I collect unfinished sentences
> to stubbornly piece them into
> something
> like a whole.

The plurality of ideas is not burdened by the necessity for a conclusion, but, nevertheless the fragments of words resemble something like a totality, however provisional, when joined together in the poem. In life, though, change is the constant: "Every evening I learn a day / by heart // Mornings I forget everything again." The title is "Amnesia, Obstinately." It is the poet's way of being in the world, not bound by the past, but continually reinventing herself. And yet, in "Emigration," she writes, "I escaped home. / It caught up." In a very real sense, we can never

escape ourselves. Any sense of totality or a hidden symmetry reveals its manifold nature when viewed through human eyes. Occasionally, the veil of illusion is torn from the eyes, as in the poem, "Holidays. Eternity," where she writes: "Time is suntan lotion / running out // And maybe also / growing irritation." The perspective, the frame, changes, and what is left is a "growing irritation." The very idea of "eternity" is questioned. In "The Underground I See" she imagines herself as moving through "human reefs / rocked by the sound / from headphones. // Seas stretch / in an infinity of platforms / then again and again. // For a moment enclosed / the human ocean / like salt water / brought from holiday / in a jar." The long shot reduces to a close up: wide open space, the ocean, suggesting infinity, is now reduced to "salt water" in a jar. Framed in this way, it is something that can be handled, clearly perceived, though it remains a fragment of the whole.

In "Prototype of Love" she speaks of a different use of language, one that results from an obsessive and potentially destructive love. Words are weighed, inspected, put under a magnifying glass, placed on scales, measured. The impulse is to drain the words of meaning or rather to place a subjective interpretation on them to control the lover. It is the light of Reason as opposed to Darkness. In my essay on the poet Barbara Barg, I wrote:

> So the story goes: the active light (male) is distinguished from the passive light or darkness (female); darkness = void = hole = vagina. Furthermore, the flesh (the earth) is bad but the spirit (the heavens) is good. This formulation of religious thought has haunted the world ever since the birth of Judeo-Christian thought. There is the central problem with the creation story; for Barg, the cosmic unity separated into a duality which associated Man with the Light of Reason containing an active spirit, and the Female, who had a passive spirit, under the rule of the Irrational; thus, the female is a demonic figure, a witch. But in this poem, Barg is imagining the world before the Cosmic Egg split and everything went

> wrong. The lady in a red dress would say: *I need the darkness again I need it so dark open eyes don't rest on any objects open eyes go straight out to outland. I'm circling, circling my own self again. Not much weight of me floating in darkness. I'm weightless and sweetly chimed, weightless and circling, lifting the eyes of my head coming around again.*

In fact Sèvres, the name of the "author" of "Prototype of Love," is a type of fine porcelain characterized by elaborate decoration on backgrounds of intense color, made at Sèvres in the suburbs of Paris. There are also poems that remind me of the Vermeer painting "Woman reading a Letter," where a woman is reading a letter alone in her drawing room. They are poems of loss, suggestive more than concrete expressions of pain:

> On the bare table
> a bottle of Sardinian wine,
> bought as a present,
> a cigarette in the ashtray,
> coffee half-drunk.
>
> On the bare table,
> Hands.
>
> On the bare table
> Silence.

What is the woman thinking? Is she thinking of a lover? Is she expecting her love who hasn't arrived? Or not? We cannot know for sure, just as we cannot read the letter that the woman is reading in Vermeer's painting. The poem is a snapshot of a mood. Sometimes "Even feelings lack focus." The story remains untold, or, at least, is without any conclusion. It is open-ended and in that, more suggestive of possible meanings, like in real life; the ambiguity mirrors actual reality. The title poem is similar in its evocation of loneliness: "I'm sitting quietly, / holding my breath. / The pigeon veers off, / makes an arc, / potters

to another table. / I'm left alone / with my crumbs." She does not vocalize her pain, but this involves also a kind of difficult acceptance despite the "growing irritation." As the Serbian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev said, "Man is not a bird." How can love survive on so little? One could "touch the catkins" if one gathered the right speed on the swing, but then one must come back down to earth, despite dreams of being swept away. And things remain between the lover and the beloved like the swing of a pendulum: "The pendulum of closeness, / The pendulum of distance. Depends." The conditional word suggests the possibility of a provisional stability in relationships. But, nevertheless, "It always rains for you, for me."

This book is also filled with certain visionary moments or transformations that suggest changes in the self. For instance, in an untitled poem, she writes:

> I unravel this sky
> like a blue thread from a ball.
> And even get bored at times.
>
> Fortunately I forget
> that deep inside there's a cunning end.

In what space can this poem be said to dwell except in a moment of heightened vision? The "cunning end" perhaps refers to an unsympathetic god, or to an abyss beyond the knowledge of humans, that disturbs in its otherness. One thinks of Jack Spicer's aliens. There remains a certain terror of the unknown in a secular age, without the widespread belief in a god. The silence is deafening. And "Time will creep / over my face" while waiting for the answer someone, a lover perhaps, will provide. But she writes, "Still I wait. // Even when / I've morphed into armchair / or bed." Can we see beyond the veil of illusion into another world without the use of stimulants or perhaps through some heightened awareness? And if so, will this provide lasting comfort, an answer to all our questions? In this digital age,

is a genuine spirituality still possible, or love, for that matter? She writes, "We are so in love / electronically. You text, email, phone. // Slowly I turn into a binary / impulse. I'll travel down / the wires or waves." Our sense of time is completely destabilized with the creation of a seamless digital world where there is no loss, no time wasted, no decay. In this sense, the poem contains a kind of ironic paradox; transformed into a "binary impulse," can we still be said to be human? And if there is no loss, no waste of time, and no decay, can that be the stable metaphor for a perfect love?

In these poems Błasiak also examines the nature of memory. There are poems that evoke a world of the past: her memories of the time she spent with her grandmother. There is also a poem that contains a memory not related to direct experience but rather literary, which suggests something about male control. It is a feminist statement:

> The Dead Carriages Remember
>
> The travellers' smell lingers in the seats.
> Feelings like a whip inserted
> into a special handle
> tremble on bumpy roads.
> The rustle of gowns on the steps,
> the rustle of leaves.
> The coachman still feels the tugs
> of the string. His lordship wants something.

Feelings are "like a whip." But the carriage itself contains the memory on the seats. Objects carry their secrets long after their owner has passed away: "Hidden in the walls / the old sewage pipes / sing at night … the screams of the injured floors … the rooms feed / on themselves." Old houses also retain memory in the objects contained within, and change their character as they age, but do not ever reveal their secrets; rather, they are evocative, suggestive. After the wallpaper is stripped, "Bare walls underneath tells an altogether different story." Something

other. There is an entire narrative beyond what can be immediately rationalized. In a portrait of a woman, in the poem entitled "Portrait," she writes: "Craquelure penetrates / her body." It is the cracks, the fissures in the paint that are the focus of this image, not the actual portrait. What of the painter of the portrait? Or the model? Nothing is said about this but the cracks evoke the passage of time. We are, as if, sexually violated by the passage of time. The portrait remains after the artist and the model have passed. In "Holidays at Grandma's," after the images of nature, the smell of apples, the "sour cherry tree in the middle of the yard," Błasiak writes, "All gone now. / Too true, the curse of the dark well / between the acacia trees and pigsty." The spell was cast when we were born, and we face the "dark well," the abyss of nothingness, despite the smell of apples and the smell of the pigs that evoke "a hot day in the country." Nature also, is animated, a mirror of the poet's emotions: "Trees also wring their hands / at this spring / in fear and wonder. // Heavy with leaves again / rows of regrets / turn green. / Stand speechless." But she is careful not to be tainted by "blossoming." She is not a breeder. To blossom suggests eventual decay. In a dream, she gives voice to the memories of youth, of the hope that eventually fades: "I'm floating. / I call out to my mum / to look at me / soaring all the way to the top." Perhaps that "hidden symmetry" is only experienced fully when one is a child, when one has no sense of the future, or the past, and exists fully in the present moment.

The photographs, by Lisa Kalloo, that accompany the book, complement the various moods generated by the poems: There are superimpositions of buildings and people as a result of photographing through a window; there are extreme close-ups of the stems of flowers; a door with a chain in front of it; an image of the gears of a machine; a globe that reflects the beach scene in front of it; three pigeons in a piazza; a shot of the ocean, calm, with sailboats in the distance; and numerous abstract images of lights, of various shapes and tonalities on granular or smooth surfaces. The aspect they all have in common is a sense of impending movement or stasis. They are dynamic in the intensity of the colors and yet subdued, pastel-like, also. A

startling transparency can give way to images that are blurred. In some respects, the images operate like those in a dream, moving between clarity and obfuscation, speed and stasis, and suggestive of a possible narrative but rarely conclusive.

In her review of Pierre Lepori's *Whatever the Name,* Błasiak writes:

> There is something archetypal about these poems, something grounding, perhaps even something that can help deal with such issues. Which doesn't mean that the suffering behind those incidents is any less apparent, or that the tragedy is less sizeable. It's just that it is painted with a more subdued, almost pastel-like technique instead of screaming expressionist colours.

Though very different from Lepori's poems, this excerpt could be a description of her own. Anna Błasiak's *Café by Wren's St James-in-the-Fields, Lunchtime* is a book of mysteries, a world where dreams and memories glaze over the consciousness, where nature and objects are sentient, evoking a past, in some cases, long gone. The poems suggest a narrative without a conclusion; they are like photographs, taken so long ago, where objects are at once clear and ambiguous. The poems record intense memories of loss but Błasiak is not sentimental; rather, she is concerned with self-transformation, wherever it is still possible in the present world. She is searching for a "hidden symmetry" in a world that is receding into a kind of digital oblivion. As the world recedes, we are given in its place a seamless digital copy, a simulacrum. Where life was once discontinuous, boring, joyful, and sad, we now have the eternal hope for a kind of digital paradise, where there is no loss, where one is constantly preoccupied, obsessed, but with a sense of mourning, a sense of something missing, a lack. She navigates this lack, with great conviction, and the result is the strong and elegant poems in this book.

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26

Behind the Girl Was the Fire

On Kythe Heller's *Firebird* (Arrowsmith Press, 2023)

Kythe Heller's book *Firebird,* opens with an anonymous Sufi poem, in which the poet's heart is exchanged for a new one, during a kind of transformative ecstatic process of unknowing, after which the poet writes: "Now I have made claim / Of my self, my heart, my voice. / They are worthless to me."[1] The poet feels chosen for this path and it was precisely when the "mind was stripped of knowing / and fled in terror from encompassing strangeness," and her "mind betrayed heart" that her heart was "returned to a shattered place" and replaced with another. The poet seems to struggle with the initial impression of love, which is human, and which is merely *Ishq-e Majazi* (an illusion of love). But in the poem, there is the movement towards the spiritual plane, which involves a purity of heart; it is movement towards Ishq-e Haqiqi (true love), which is the love of God. This reminds me of the words of the Sufi poet, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad:

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Talisman House* online, 2023.

> Anyone who is so dead of heart who has never had the good fortune of destroying his peace and sanity in anticipation of the unveiling of earthly beauty is hardly likely to experience the presence of Divine Beauty through his earthly sense.

In the Sufi path, yearning and longing for the love of the Divine comes to those who are fortunate enough to have experienced this desire for a Beloved who is heartless and indifferent. It is at this point, in extreme pain and mental distress, that the lover can destroy and become free of the self and alive to the harmonies of creation. It is this blurring of identities, in pain, which is a major theme in Sufi poetry; it is the movement from object to object, lover to beloved, and the unifying of them in a mental movement of yearning, a dance of dispossession. The distance between lover and beloved is closed, one flows into the other. There is a process of unification on a spiritual plane, where individual ego is subsumed in ecstasy. Azad writes: "If the seekers are searching for beauty, then why wait for the hidden to be revealed? They should be startled and dazed by the light emanating from the veil." In Heller's opening poem, the poet's anguish and despair are so intense that you can feel her breaking away from reality, and experiencing a kind of ecstatic despair. Love is consummated on a higher plane and this involves the destruction of the self.

The heart, according to Islamic, Sufi, or Christian mystics is often symbolized by the Bird — Simurgh, Dove, or Phoenix — ignited by the divine passion, which then is known as the "The Fire Bird." Fire is the primal element that works its magic in these poems. We encounter the poet, herself, the burning girl, and a runaway. Heller spent time in Oregon, working nights at a homeless shelter. It was there that she encountered a young woman who had a disease in which her body suffered from intense fevers; her whole body was as if on fire. In *Firebird,* the identities of the two women will blur; Heller's own life will weave, like a mosaic, with that of the burning girl. Heller has spoken of how she befriended the young girl. But even as these burning girl characters blend into each other, it is important to

note that many of the experiences the book relates have actually happened to Heller, as a homeless teenager, as a runaway, as someone who is "burning." And yet there have been intense connections with others who also are burning, and whom she worked with at the shelters. And some of these burning girls have also entered an archetypal character of the burning girl. She may be multiple or one, or nothing, complex and subtle, unknowable, herself and not herself, all at once. Or maybe not. For Heller, "Life itself should have been enough // but she wanted more. She wanted meaning … / Perhaps that is why she was punished / with obvious zeal: she was not clever enough / to understand a lesson more subtle." She goes on to write:

> But that life is over.
>
> She set fire to the paper bird.
> She swung the flaming effigy through the sky until it was gone.
>
> *Speak,* said Death.
> *But I am a child.*
>
> *Do not say you are a child;*
> *You are no one you have ever been.*

The Sufi poet Fariduddin Attar writes, "And when you become ashes and dust, / Then you will dance reflected by the Sun." There is an emphasis in Sufi poetry on the direct personal experience of the Divine. This can happen through something Sufis call *fanaa,* which means "to pass away" or "to be annihilated." It is the self that is being annihilated while remaining alive (the purest manifestation of this is in death), to achieve a state where "you are no one you have ever been." The Sufi poet Mansur Hallaj writes: "In my annihilation is my annihilation's annihilation / And You are found in my annihilation."

In our present time, "fire" takes on a new, urgent meaning. This country is so polarized with imaginary lines that divide

white from Black, gay from straight, man from woman, old from young, Muslim from Catholic. Trump's angry rhetoric, even after he has lost an election, is starting a war among the people in the USA, and the recent riots in the streets and the violent attack on the capitol are only one symptom of a larger problem. Recently, protesters swarmed the streets in New York and Los Angeles and throughout the USA after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. The streets of some cities looked like a scene from Paris in 1968, with the flames rising from burning buildings. It was a reminder that Black Lives Do Matter. The police are grossly overpaid and protected by police unions, so it's hard to get them fired, which is why that murderer cop, after seventeen complaints, didn't get let go. It does seem that the sky is falling. Heller writes, "everything is burning, / has been and is always burning." She continues:

> I laughed and laughed. And I thought: How can the fire hurt me when I too am made of fire? The fire's fingers, my fingers; the fire's eyes, mouth, tongue — mine. Fire you are mine, you have always been mine: LIFE! LIFE! LIFE! LIFE! LIFE! And I thought: I have a pure heart. I have annihilated everything that is created. I HAVE SEEN how it is so small, smaller than even my thumb, so small it is nothing. And I thought: it is nothing that is burning.

This passage can be understood as a reflection of the insanity of the burning world. I think of the forest fires that ravaged the West Coast recently. It is as if the heart of the world is on fire. But there is hope that, like a phoenix, this world will emerge from its pain, from the dust and ashes, transformed into something new. Since people were home, because of the lockdown, as a result of the COVID-19 virus, their priorities have changed. They have now perhaps realized that material things are not so important when loved ones are threatened with death. Perhaps the self can now be conquered by love. From the vantage point of the spiritual plane these events in the world seem small, or rather part of a deeper process of transformation. Heller writes,

"*I dreamed that I was fire, she said / a ragged bandage over the light. / Then the bandage was torn away.* / When I woke, I felt tears burning my skin." This is the pain and suffering of love, that precedes the love on a higher spiritual plane. It is said in various mystical traditions that when nothing is left, and one feels abandoned as if in a desert, there is one thing then that does remain: God.

In the second section of the poem, "Mattress Under the Overpass," the burning of a mattress will have implications for the narrator and her relation to the world. Heller writes: "Look inside the mattress, the suffering // burns. The desire // to heal again through suffering burns." This burning is an attempt "to burn away what she was, what she meant to become." The burning mattress represents human desire and physical love, as well as the pain and suffering associated with this, in flames. The burning represents the heart on fire, and as this flame is refined it transforms into pure spirit. It is a healing fire that transforms one to another plane. Furthermore, Heller writes: "The body of eyes everywhere a joyful sobbing; everywhere a crackling wash of cries where the glowing coals emerge // just at the center of the fluff of ash and blackened fabric." At one point, in Heller's short film in which she burns a mattress on the beach, there is a close-up of the fire; it is blurry, and there are orbs of color that appear like eyes looking out. The various recent protests in the streets are like a collective cry of pain, amidst the flames, "everywhere a crackling wash of cries." I think of government buildings on fire, men and women on the street protesting: "a whole body, eyelids flickering…a unified weeping like the emergence of a soul." The section ends with a quote from M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen:

> Then that heart … melted into the form of liquid pearl, which wobbled, flowed over, and rolled, drop by drop, to shatter into resplendences of grace … scattered as seeds of life and as light rays.

The passage describes the fire bird's final transformation. A liquid pearl is produced as if from an alchemical process and "drop by drop" it scatters seeds "of life and light rays." It is a lovely and mysterious description of what occurs after the heart is burned and purified by fire.

In 2012, I filmed, alone and with a small point-and-shoot Canon camera, homeless vets, former drug addicts, and gang members in New Jersey and on the Lower East Side for a film I was making. Despite considerable risk, I was able to document the language and face of despair and anger otherwise silenced in the media. There is an increasing divide between the everyday "normal" life of the average American and the "extraordinary" life of the privileged. Many of these men and women live outside these two worlds. They are invisible. But they all have something to tell us. And we must listen. The burned girl and the runaway are the kinds of people I talked to. They are on fire; there is anger, despair, suffering, extreme pain, and perhaps the possibility of transformation. They, too, have the possibility, as we all do, of emerging, transformed like a phoenix, from the fire. This would mean seeing all of us connected, "moving together in a flushed permeability," where there are no false dividing lines, no mysterious other, but a single body of which we are a part, working together, accepting our differences. We must remember, as E.J.W. Gibb writes in *A History of Ottoman Poetry,* that:

> Man, like the phenomenal universe in which he finds himself, and of which he presents an epitome, is double-natured, partaking at once of Being and Non-Being, of Good and Evil, of Reality and Unreality. But as that side of him derives from Being, and which therefore alone has a real and eternal existence, is necessarily an emanation of Divinity, he is, so far, ultimately and essentially one with God.

One must, as the Sufi poet Saadi Shirazi writes, "destroy the idol of the self." It is through love that the self is conquered. Heller writes, "In the mirror, all the sparks stir. A mirror is a liquid fever." To long for something or someone, to suffer, is like a fire

that blurs one's reflection in a mirror. It is a fever that melts the ego. It is the annihilation of the self. Heller writes, "It's not enough to know what she knows. I want — what she is the metaphor for. What she is — beyond metaphor." That is, beyond language. But the way in which the visible and the invisible interact is often in equal measure. A certain detail is able to inhabit and express simultaneously the visible and the invisible, able to articulate as much as it hides. But there is a break in the continuum, a rift in the eternal, and we are time-bound, painfully aware of our own mortality in this fallen world. But the Sufi poet Kabir writes: "Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus / And there gaze on the Infinite Beauty." To see "beyond metaphor" is to see things as both unified and as double. It is essentially to break the chains of reason. Here is the weaving of past and present into a single continuum, and this is the Sufi essence of time. In this perception the splits between past, present, and even future disappear into a simultaneity — into movements of perception. In the space of consummation time is not split into past, present, and future. Just as the idea of linear time interrupts the perception of a continuum, so does the ego create a distance between the I and the other. I am reminded of the words of the Sufi poet Kabir: "The consciousness and the unconscious, both are His footstools. / He is neither manifest nor hidden, He is neither revealed nor unrevealed: /There are no words to tell that which He is."

Heller writes in "That Heart," the final section of *Firebird,* "She was that last, unspeakable thing: / the body like a field stripped to bare ground, then burnt." She refers, in the last line of *Firebird,* to the anonymous Sufi poem that began it: "In *that* heart [my emphasis], what point is there in dying or being born again?" Melancholy begins at birth. The original state of unity is broken; there is instead a multiplicity of phenomena and this is what causes suffering. There is also a potential source of despair since the movements of time sometimes are much slower than the forward movement of our hopes. This forward, linear perception of time is also a cause of suffering: One fails to experience the simultaneity of past, present, and future during the

arc of ascent or descent. The Sufi concept of the arc of descent and ascent is the movement from the multiplicity of phenomena to the unity with divine essence and the reverse. This movement is not sequential but continuous, two aspects of this divine essence. It is a sobering experience rather than the dizzy, disoriented feeling of ecstasy that is at the heart of Sufism. To die and be born again is to be bound by time. But, as Hafiz writes, "In comparison to a drop of that wine, Hafiz, / All reason and sense are useless." Let us hope that all the anger and division in the world is transformed in a collective song of hope and love. Kythe Heller's *Firebird* is a book that reaffirms my belief that change is possible, especially now when there are so many who are suffering without any hope in the future. Poetry like hers is life-affirming and exactly the type of writing we need in this world. It is a transformative light in the growing darkness.

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27

The Eye Must Listen before Looking

Notes on Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* (Siglio Press, 2020)

1.

Bernadette Mayer's *Memory* contains around 1,100 photographs along with thirty-one poetic journal entries.[1] Each day for the month of July, 1971, Mayer would take photographs, using up a roll of film, and write in her journal: "take pictures for a week, say, then put them away don't even show them around for a year & see what you remember & a week's diary too." At first, while reading the journal entries and looking at the photographs, I thought of experimental films, like the diaristic films of Jonas Mekas, and of films in general.[2] In *ArtForum,* Mayer writes:

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2020.

2 Mayer describes a "weird science fiction movie" she and her friends made and here her language is playful: "I looked like two strawberries trees rustling in the background noses, breasts, martians we make a weird science fiction movie where people shot at angles are still & and are still for a long enough time to alter your perspective & consciousness and so you begin to believe they are in the proper perspective as not-people, the movie can be

> I was twenty-six years old when I started *Memory*. I look like such a kid in the photos … I can see myself growing up through the course of the month. I got the idea from Godard, who said that image and sound make a film. Then again, he also said all you needed to make a film was a girl and a gun.

Film speed is usually 24 frames/sec. I imagined that if each photo was a frame in a film, the resulting film would be close to a minute long. Each image would go by so fast that the viewer would not be able to retain memory of all of it (the memories at best would be fragmentary) and the context of the photos would be lost in the rush of images. But there are also the journal entries to consider. Yet, in the same way, I imagined each line (or groups of sentences) as images being spliced onto the page, the page itself as if containing a sequence of frames in a film: Mayer is "writing writing pictures of." The "cuts" in the text are quick and often discontinuous, concerned more with recording "states of consciousness" than with a linear narrative. Bernadette and her friends are seen performing various tasks, or alone reading, or in a car, etc. and these images are hinted at in the text, as though they were brief and discrete moments in the continuous flow of consciousness. The relation of the photographs to the text is asymmetrical and dynamic. The space between the text and the images is where thought occurs; it is associative, rather than logical, and leads to alternative readings. As a reader we are asked to interpret multiple realities that occur simultaneously and to see, or rather, feel, resonances, in the spaces between the image and the text (sound).

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all talk." She also describes recording sounds in the streets or at a diner, for use in a movie. This reminded me of Harry Smith hanging a microphone out of Allen Ginsberg's window to record the sounds of the Lower East Side.

2.

New skins cells are born every twenty-eight to forty days. The rate at which the body completely changes is faster than the eye can see or remember. Change appears slow as we look at ourselves in the mirror each day, but rapid at the molecular level. Change is deceptive, like old photographs. The film image we see on a screen is the result of light passing through a projector: a construction. And our sense of time is subjective, despite the movement of the clock hands ("memory laughs at the intuition of time"). Light, time, language, memory: These are the central concerns in the book. Mayer often speaks of light, until it acquires a kind of eternal quality: "the light in the white room looks like itself, all the lights … between black & white is blue, all is light." Anyone who has shot a film on a Bolex knows the importance of the light meter, which, if not calibrated correctly, could cause the entire film to be underexposed.

3.

Mayer quotes Robert Macfarlane in her short introduction to *Memory*: "Time seemed to express itself in terms not of hours and minutes, but of shades and textures." Many of the photos are under- or overexposed, giving the images a feeling of the passage of time. In a sense, they have considerably aged right after they were taken. The photos often border on abstraction. They are generally more a study of light and lines, the geometry of space, and only occasionally of people. Riding in a train and looking out the window you see the trees flashing by, quick movements of green, and your mind wanders. Memories do not follow one another in a chronological way, but are fragmentary, ambiguous. Memories seem to occur almost in a liminal state, where it is not a matter of the clear representation of images. The space between image and text opens up alternative readings, and a kind of third dimension of thought, but the ambiguity and mysterious nature of life remains. Photos in sequence create a provisional chronology of a life and help us remember people and

events; it is a record. But even a clear photo of a person retains its ambiguity relative to time or place. Life is not composed of a discrete series of events in time. But, rather, according to Henri Bergson, we experience a discontinuous succession of heterogeneous psychical states, all leading to a provisional unity, which discloses further multiplicities and is not static. Mayer echoes Bergson when she writes that time is "a real duration, the heterogeneous moments of which permeate one another." Looking at the photos, Bernadette and her friends struggle to remember the context of the photos, and even their initial meaning or initial reason for existing: When was that taken? Where? Was that after or before we went there? I'm not sure what that object is in the photo. I don't even remember taking that one.

4.

Mayer writes, "as I write all this stuff down I know it comes out of nowhere goes nowhere & remains, nothing leaves. It's almost a truth." This a metaphysical idea. Where does it all go? As the jazz musician Eric Dolphy once said, speaking about music, "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again."[3] Mayer's quote reminds me the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides: "How could what is perish? How could it have come to be? For if it came into being, it is not; nor will it be if it is ever going to come into existence. Thus coming into being is extinguished, and destruction unknown." Everything that is coming into being is provisional and returns back to nonbeing, "always back to where we both began no matter how far back." The interaction of light and darkness (the photos and language), being and nonbeing could be understood as a kind of eternal cycle without end.

3 Eric Dolphy's quotation was said in a 1964 Dutch radio interview. The full, legendary excerpt serves as the conclusion to his final album, *Last Date* (Limelight Records, 1965).

5.

In the last few journal entries, Mayer questions how we can have ideas at all: "this idea of my having had those ideas is a very complicated idea." The mathematician Roger Penrose offers an interesting theory where he suggests that a stream of consciousness is an arranged series of quantum physical events taking place in the brain and that is produced in the brain by a subprotein called α-tubulin. Mayer goes on to question how we can have a consciousness at all:

> That brains should give rise to a knowing consciousness at all & this is the one mystery which returns no matter what kind of consciousness it is & what kind of knowledge it may be & sensations, aware of just qualities, mere qualities, involve the mystery as much as thoughts, aware of complex systems, what other days?

Explaining consciousness has vexed scientists and philosophers for a long time, and with the introduction of neuroscience, the problem became even more complex. The quantum physicist John Archibald Wheeler questioned whether life and the mind are irrelevant to the structure of the universe, or central to it. He originated the idea of a "participatory," conscious universe, a universe in which we are co-creators; this replaced the accepted idea of an "out there" which is distinct from us. He derived this unusual idea from an aspect of quantum physics: Before an observation is made, a subatomic particle exists in several states, simultaneously, but once the particle is observed, it instantaneously collapses into a single position. Consciousness is not static but fluid. Furthermore, Mayer writes, "in a system every fact is connected with every other by some thought-relation & the consequence is that every fact is retained by the combined suggestive power of all the other facts in the system & forgetting is almost impossible." The thrust of the book is towards a collective memory, despite the mysterious nature of

reality: "pooling our mysteries together we fall into one great mystery & tomorrow will come from the air." Furthermore, the build-up of language and image[4] is there "to lull you then into now being for a while into being me, can you feel it, becoming part of the rest of the story." We, the readers, are part of the story. Mayer's quotidian details are common to this reader: wake up, brew coffee, light cigarette, go for a drive, read, catch a bite at a diner, hang out with the same or different friends, talk, write, etc. Mayer's language is at once particular and general, local and cosmic. Images of nature and the sky, the darkness and the light, combine with images of Mayer's friends. Furthermore, the collective memory acts differently from the individual memory which is more subject to forgetting. And so *Memory* is also a call for solidarity in the fight for justice. Today, we see this solidary in the protests by Black Lives Matter and others in the streets of major cities in America, after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer. And it is only by never forgetting the sheer brutality and the scale of the Holocaust that we can ensure that it never happens again.

6.

But Mayer admits that she "cant solve the mystery." As a result, in the final pages of Memory, Mayer experiences emotions of fear and anger:

> As a finish to memory I learn one thing, that the fear's already started, it's the same one, already begun, always back to where we both began no matter how far back & it's sincere its's boring for the words & it's also anger, I just threw that in, dont let anger have an effectiveness, drain it, use it, store it,

4 Mayer writes in the short introduction to *Memory*: "Then and now, I thought that if there were a computer or device that could record everything you think or see, even for a single day, that would make an interesting piece of language/information, but it seems like we are walking backward since everything that becomes popular is a very small part of experience of being human, as if it were all too much for us."

> whatever you do with it, never take advice like from a mountain running down & as far as it's almost truth it isn't worth syllables, the syllables break up to make a mask…I repeat you get harder tougher or sleepier; you sleep … do what I can, that's shit & maybe it's just the syllables that make words, try others.

In this complex passage, Mayer's fear and anger cause her to question the success of words in expressing what is ultimately a mystery about life and consciousness. Knowledge can be like a mask we wear in the absence of anything better. So too, words reveal as much as they hide about the nature of reality, and can provide a cover instead of expressing the truth. Semantic meaning is the greatest mask: "meaning is a physiognomy." But Mayer concludes that if language is all we have, we must create a new kind of language, which is exactly what she does in *Memory*. Furthermore, we must "defend our states of consciousness." Because of the attempt by conservatives to enforce the homogenization of culture in favor of the white race, we must defend the idea of a true democracy, which is heterodox, and includes a diversity of ideas and voices.

7.

In the last few pages, as a result of the tension caused by anger and fear, Mayer undergoes a kind of metaphysical crisis:

> I want to leave this space I want to get out of here I want to move into an eternal space the right space I want to design it have you freed me to addict myself to take that risk, escape no longer draws me in, just kill the pain … we have no regular plan, no drama, in the dark everything's a mess, there's no end to it in a space as big as this no walls & I hate myself for keeping on going as if the production of something out of nothing out of here where there is nothing were worthwhile.

The suffering of being human in a world where there is no guarantee of paradise, or no observable order in the immense cosmos, is only made more difficult by the failure to remember, and the photographs and the text can give one no solace, because "in the dark everything's a mess." In one respect, nothingness is a state of "pure consciousness" where the mind has been emptied of everything it contained. It is also the dissolution of opposites, but not the end of multiplicities. But Mayer writes: "observe me as I trance myself beyond death." Not into a false paradise but a deep transformation of consciousness. She continues, "write it down a written record dead poet flying crows & a trace, a stronger texture impossible to tear, I still imitate I still review, the fog goes on there's a name for it: the surface of the eyes pervert senses." This echoes William Blake's famous phrase from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." And for Jean-Luc Godard, from whom Mayer got the idea for the book, "the eye must listen before looking"[5]: There is a current between a person's biological nature and their intellectual creation. Mind and matter are not distinct but permeate each other. Looking at an image you initially only see the surface (in this sense, meaning is like a face, as Mayer noted in the book) but to listen (thinking in the abstract) first is to see with the mind's eye and move beyond merely semantic meanings. In *Memory,* we read the journal entries in conjunction with the photos, not through the normal lens of vision and the mind, but as though "listening" with the "eye."

5 Jean-Luc Godard's phrase "the eye must listen before looking" is also translated as "the eye must listen before it looks." It is from his film *Le gai savoir* (1969). See Arta Barzanji, "Godard as Presence: A Ghost Obituary," *photogénie,* March 9, 2023. https://photogenie.be/godard-as-presence-a-ghost-obituary/.

8.

Mayer concludes her comments on *Memory* for *ArtForum,* in this way: "*Memory* was an attempt to find out if people would get into that funny space where the words are floating around the room and so are the pictures. I still am hoping." *Memory* is one of the best books I've read so far this year, and as a filmmaker and photographer, it has provoked a new way of seeing the possibilities of relating text to image. It is a complex and provocative work and now, in its new form, thanks to Siglio Press, with the original images on the facing page, it is sure to become a classic of contemporary American poetry.

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28

There's No Way Out, So Go Deeper

On *Peaches & Gravy: Selected Poems 1966–2016* (Cuneiform, 2020)

This generous selection of Larry Fagin's poetry, *Peaches & Gravy: Selected Poems 1966–2016,* contains poems that vary from those concerned with identity, the world, and one's relation to it, to poems where the thought is located in the sounds of the words: "sound as thought."[1] Throughout, one experiences the sheer variety of these poems, and their intoxicating strangeness. In free improvisation, one requires quick responses to constantly shifting musical realities. Instinctive unity of mind, hand, mouth is required: Out with the ego. You need to be quick, "on the fly," then it's gone. It's about aiming for the Total Sound, heard in part. When it works: success of the ultimate dares. In this way, I think of Larry Fagin's poems as wonderful improvisations, catching things as they're about to disappear.

His poems set up narrative frames and then collapse them. The narrative wobbles outside the frame and the sound amplifies in the ear; "content is a glimpse" and "costume fitting is the

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2020.

beginning of character development." For Fagin, it's not the facts that memory has worked over but the surge from and lap back into the constant blast: "Being present is improvised and temporary." Then there's the luminous dark: "Black is the color, more luminous than my true love's hair."

These poems don't stall at the terminal, they grow up and out of where everything actuates in myriad profusion. Take this passage from "I Call On Edward L. Mann," where a filmmaker is describing his unmakeable film:

> There's a gang at first, six or seven hood types, mostly in their late twenties. They go around to bars, movies, etc. Then these two, Jack and Joe, decide to leave town and go to New York. There's a long Greyhound bus sequence and you see how everyone, all the passengers on this bus, can do a special trick. There's an old man who can make large bubbles just from his own spit, in funny shapes, there's a young woman with a snake in her purse, a little baby who speaks Dutch (but whose parents are Okies), and so on. The passengers make a chorus and there's singing, "Keep Your Sunny Side Up," "Smiles," etc. There's a large off-screen orchestra. Jack and Joe can't do much, it's frightening for them. They really go right across the land and it shows the best and worst parts, lots of dull things. The second half is when they get to New York.

The poem has no other point than the wild extended description of a film that is so strange the filmmaker is having trouble making it.

Fagin writes: "What is the verb of this music." Imagine a culture that had no nouns, like that of the Hopi Indians. He quotes saxophonist Lee Konitz: "Think bed, not pedestal." Horizonal not vertical:

> Never take no
> Mountain
> Accommodation
> Seriously

Considering darkness
After all
Nothing ever is

At his best, Fagin's poems are like jazz solos, freeing the velocities of his angling line that picks up things that slower thought needs time to prepare as statement. These poems rumble up to the surface as undesirable noise to disrupt the critic's discourse. John Cage writes: "When you hear sounds that have microtonal relations that are unfamiliar, you tend to think away from law toward nature. We've had the habits and proclivities and tastes of imperialists, so we've colonized what we've thought of as the 'strong sounds' in nature, while leaving a whole spectrum unnoticed." Fagin's poems are generous and open-ended, pluralistic; they aim for a "debourgeoisiefication" of the language. The "I" has been around too long; time to change things up. They are *about* everything and nothing at the same time. They are narratives with no plot, they are glimpses of the world in close-up or long shot. They are "out there," sonically rich and wild, like the poem for Steve Lacy, "Stabs," or grounded in perception of the real: "Outdoor life's what / I mean. I pull back / these wine-purple drapes / and am relieved to see / it's like it is." There is no unifying theme or structure or rather many things and "ideas" converge in a single poem. These are poems in endless motion around a static point, aiming for the Total Work; this reminds me of Clark Coolidge's "unstoppable endless volleying Everything Work." Fagin writes "You must take it all without arguing and you can't give it back." The stakes are that high.

Steve Lacy once said, "It reached a point where I, and many other people, got sick and tired of the 'beat' and the '4 bars' — everybody got tired of the systematic playing, and we just said 'Fuck it.'" This could be a statement of Fagin's poetics or at least an aspect of it; in "Dig & Delve," Fagin writes "No strict pattern holds. We had to let go of rule of thumb. I can't explain but you understand." In Fagin's poems, there are connection points, waystations, and drifting subatomic explosions in the language that destabilize our sense of meaning: "Vendible

towel / Blackbird insulin theurgy moisten tyke / Vilify opposable vinaigrette." Gravity is suspended and time, also: "My general view of life is that everything is about a week away." There are halts, a sense of weightlessness. Then signs, signals to turn, enter elsewhere to a "sunny place of no dimensions." Not intentionally but through a gratuitous act. That's one definition of poetry! And that place is not somewhere above you. It's a flat plane where "Nothing ever happens but it will — the is-ness of the is-about-to-be." What is? That's the question. Or is it? It is and that's that. Fagin writes, "Meanwhile, / there is a / meanwhile, // Where / is / it." Fagin plays with the nature of time. "Meanwhile" could be at the same time. Not either/or but both. Tune into the bird's frequencies; slowed down you can actually hear them producing more than one note at the same time naturally. When done with a monophonic instrument, like a soprano saxophone, this technique is called multiphonics. Fagan's poems are multiphonic, all the sounds occurring at the same time. This is because for Fagan, "Different and same are the same."

Forget about finding a way out of the mess of things; for Fagin "there's no way out so go deeper," deeper into the soundscape. But you have to "spot what don't fit, bombs in fake rock." And beware, "The whole thing is a mystico. Don't go out there, you'll freeze." Why? Because the nether regions are cold, unfeeling. Watch your step. Change direction. There are no answers to be found there. Better to change the frame:

I'd like
To keep
myself

out
of this…
this…

whatever
you
call it

Because when you're speaking inside the Hole all you see is the Hole: "When my head / goes too fast / I get out / and walk." Fagin mentions "Seeing through the eye / Not with it / Lifting the hood." This suggests a kind of mystical vision but the following line, "I yam what I yam," deflates the potential serious interpretation of the poem. There is an ethics in all of this: "The words want to be alone together. It's one way to put them through it. Ethics not aesthetics demands it." For saxophonist John Butcher, in order "for improvisers to make sense, sounds must be put to work." The language must be put to work. And there's no way around it; you have to "collaborate, negotiate, brawl with your demons" to gain entry to the ball.

Every poem exists in time and vanishes in time, like in alto saxophonist Eric Dolphy's famous statement about the music: "When you hear music, after it's over it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again." Hearing produces a poem on the fly that contains what was picked up in the act. For Fagin, "'writing explains nothing,' just in time." This is time as in the measurement of time, and "just in time" as in the right time before something potentially happens. I'm also thinking of the jazz standard, "Just in Time" with a melody by Julie Styne and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolphe Green.

Instead of tedious explanations about the world, Fagin asks what is the point of all that racket:

> The point is
> (birds wearing little
> jackets & dresses)
> there isn't any.

Or if you prefer, the point is simply "birds wearing little jackets and dresses." That's all, nothing more. Strange, isn't it? But that's the essence and wonder of Fagin's poetry. And that's all there is, by which Fagin means the whole nine yards: "I mean *everything*." But this everything is endless and the whole can only be seen in part: "What isn't 'partly'? Seen and unseen, never com-

plete…. Try to find your way out of whatever you're in, door open just a crack." Just a bit of light to see by in the dark.

The first poem in *Peaches & Gravy: Selected Poems 1966–2016* is called "Credo": "If you are to believe in yourself you must have the most incisive of insights, the clearest of visions. You must be entirely realistic about yourself and about the world you live in." The evidence of the poems in this book show that he was true to this initial vision. The poems are wonderfully bizarre, sonically varied like a saxophone solo by Charlie Parker, lyrical, and precise. They move at varied speeds as they register on the mind, giving off strange emanations. His poems can be serious, dealing with the nature of the self or the world, but not so serious as to approach the academic. Finally, *Peaches & Gravy: Selected Poems 1966–2016* offers a reader a generous selection of his poetry, with an insightful introduction by Miles Champion and wonderful drawings by George Schneeman, Joe Brainard, and a collaboration with Richard Tuttle. All together, it's enough to spark interest in someone who has never read him before. It is my hope that the publication of this volume gathers new readers of Fagin's work.

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29

In the Tearing Wind

A Conversation with Ed Foster's *A Looking-Glass for Traytors* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2020)

Edward Foster, in his new book of poems *A Looking-Glass for Traytors,* explores the nature of desire and memory, risking the articulation of what cannot be said, even to the very end, despite chaos, pain, or the oncoming night.[1] So that ecstasy or understanding might be possible: "maintain a quiet surface, and sublimity within is freedom." The speaker in the poem is going rounds with the ghosts of the past. But there is a stalemate. There's no winner and no loser in this game, just the night and the silence of the snow-covered field, the cold of the winter nights, to greet the poet alone in his room with his memories. These are the thoughts of a man who has seen many things and experienced love and loss, the pain of being. He is at war with himself, but it is a war he cannot win. Time is against him. Memories flood his mind, as if he is unable to control the feelings of regret and of loss. The cyclical pattern of nature is not a source of comfort. Winters and springs come and go just like fashions.

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2021.

Perhaps something does remain, but it is not something we can see. It is not visible, not something we can partition out with our various knowledges. It cannot be analyzed, only felt.

Desire often leads to a sense of failure, loss. Can we ever get what we really want? What does it mean to have risked everything? We come back to ourselves, to our masks, and are grounded again, localized, put in our place. Often, it is true, though, that we get what we deserve — or do we? Did what we choose effect anything? At times it really seems like it did, or we tell ourselves this. Our memories are not reliable though we want them to be. Foster writes:

> The river rises.
> Rains begin to fall.
> The ones I used to want
> Are nowhere near,
> No longer near.

The domestic situation is exhausted to a point of contention: "Shouldn't I have spoken / When we still had time?" This is from a poem called "Marriage." Regret too will pass, as it gets darker, and you can hear the wind howling in the snow-covered branches, casting snow adrift on the open fields. There will only be silence in the end and the feeling that one is alone. As Foster writes, speaking of Henry David Thoreau, a "man thinking and working alone is by no means merely solipsistic or self-deluding; there are 'common interests' from which we all proceed. Thoreau's ideal was the self-sufficient man, he who welcomes solitude and silence, not institutions and laws, as the origin of truth." This silence is felt in the photos included in the book, which are often of snow-covered trees, snow on the ground, or an isolated, snow-covered house, and a path in the woods, also covered with snow. It is cold outside. Snow is the central fact of these poems. There is a bareness and emptiness here, an overwhelming silence at the heart of this book. They are winter poems.

Foster tries to express that which is intangible and mysterious. The poet refuses to found anything, neither systems, kingdoms, nor servitudes (in fact the title, *A Looking-Glass for Traytors,* refers to men who were willing to be executed for showing their resistance to the monarchy of Charles I). In his invisibility the poet has become his surroundings. In this way, a subjective experience leads to an objective awareness. The poet creates his art, fueled by the constant threat of danger, showing caution in expression since he approaches the limits of the sayable. He is approaching a oneness with the natural world. It speaks to him in its silence, everywhere. Welcoming him into the darkness, the silence, that is, "the world of potentialities and meanings beyond the actual and the expressed." So Foster's poems always seems to be at the point of breaking apart, the words scattering into the void, the vast nothingness of the white of the page. There is no escape:

> Oh, let me, God,
> Get out
>
> Before these folks have
> Trapped me once
> Again

The words remain as if etched in shadow or written on water. What appears clearly said is in fact overwhelmed by ambiguity. The words hold back more than they bring to light in an attempt to illuminate something that remains hidden, if only briefly, and for the duration of the poem. Then nothing, and all the words return to the void from which they came. Then there is only silence, and the silence will remain after everything is gone. Foster is often ironic when he speaks of the transformative possibility of the self through the acquisition of knowledge or faith, whether rational or mystical. He reminds us that the end is the same:

> Thus youth is gone.

Failure and guilt
Awaiting magic
That cannot be.

What is important, for Foster, is that we don't rely on absolutes. Nothing will remain, but the sound of the wind weaving through the trees. And the coming of the night which cannot be stopped. All must eventually face the final reckoning with a force beyond human comprehension. No hope no fear, a matter of learning too late what one should have known before. There will be nothing to remember as everything fades, as one ages, and relationships come to nothing, and marriage fails and even friendships become strained to the point of contention:

Consider yourself lucky
When you
Leave
If there
Is
Nothing left behind….

If only pain
Would go away

But how can we know in advance what would have prevented the oncoming storm, the sense of failure or regret? The script is a lie. And that goes for any script. But Foster writes: "I walk along the forest path / My choice determined by the wind." It is in these moments when we are beyond ourselves, following the wind, where nothing is expected of us, where we are unbound by the dictates of even life itself, as if in the wind, we enter a blissful darkness not unlike death.

Foster writes, "The wind's will is Pan's will; / Heel to toe, toe to heel. / This dance is dark and bleak." Here another order exists, another reality. It is a vision of Pan, the spirit residing deeply in these poems, that James Hillman speaks of in *Pan and the Nightmare,* quoted in the book: "Pan's vision of humanity is that

we, too, are pure nature in whom the volcanic eruptions, the destructive seizures and typhoons also reside." It is these eruptions, seizures, and typhoons of desire that lie at the surface of these poems, waiting to break through, creating a tension that gives the poems an intense aura. What I mean is that it is a dark aura, dark with the absorption of experience, and knowledge of self. Gnosis. Whose only law is that there is no law. Where one must confront the dark, in whose depths resides the Beast of the unconscious.

In Foster's poems the Beast can be understood as Pan. The quote from Walter F. Otto's *Dionysus: Myth and Cult,* in the beginning of Foster's book, states: "Dionysus, himself, who raises into the heights of ecstasy, is the suffering god. The rapture which he brings rises from the innermost stirrings of that which lives. But wherever these depths are agitated, there, along with rapture and birth, rise up also horror and ruin." Here I mean to suggest the dark resonances that operate, in secret, deep inside these poems, manifesting their energy in the language, and are beyond good and evil. Pan stands for the dark energy of sexual desire and nonconformity. Any form of authority must be resisted. And in the end, after all is lost, and seemingly only despair remains, something remains, there, in the wind, the changing breezes, in the drifts of snow that cover the fields, in the cold, in the silence. It is dark and you cannot see where you are going. You can't go on, but you go on. That is the closest thing to freedom. Nothing is still, all is moving. That is the god speaking. Nothing will be remembered. Even the poem itself may not be remembered.

For Foster there are moments in life when we can escape the ego, and emerge, as if transformed, but this is not because of the mind, but the body. For Foster, at these moments, "Suffering and the past no longer invade the soul, and nothing is left, for the moment, but freedom 'in the tearing wind.'" This is the liberation of not being bound by anything, where you remember nothing, regret nothing, move as if outside life itself, not bound by anything anyone has ever said, or one's memories, or any

acquired knowledge; one enters oblivion, willingly. One burns with the speed of the wind, tearing through space, until one is nothing at all, stripped of everything. One is perhaps then just a pure light entering the final darkness that will consume all. Edward Foster's *A Looking-Glass for Traytors* is a kind of road-map of this forbidden territory; it is a place where the god Pan rules.

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30

"WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY"

Notes on John Ruskin

As I write at my desk, it is autumn and there is a chill in the air.[1] I see the leaves have turned from green to a brownish-red color, and breezes are scattering them across the yard; I see a wide lawn before me and the shape of the tall trees in the distance that reflect the light that gives them a golden hue at dawn. The complex sounds of the birdsong have become rarer now as winter approaches. I am thinking of how the ocean waves that crash against the shore continually change their shape. None is similar to another; their movement does not function like a piece of machinery with a constant rhythm. They are irregular, imperfect. Nature is neither silent nor static. In *The Stones of Venice,* John Ruskin writes:

> Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. The foxglove blossom, — a third part bud, a third part past, a third part in full bloom, — is a type of the life of this world. And in all things that live there are cer-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2022.

> tain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty. All admit irregularity as they imply change.

Every painting from nature is flawed if it approaches the natural scene and attempts, like a photograph, to capture it exactly. There is no perfection in the world. Everything is imperfect. In *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin writes, "But, accurately speaking, no good work whatever can be perfect, and *the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art*." This is because nothing can be seen clearly, only suggested.

For Ruskin, the painting of a flower, however precise the rendition, is deficient with respect to the actual flower as it exists in nature. Nature will not reveal all its secrets. For him, painting required seeing into the truth[2] of nature. If one, for example, confronted a sky that was blue and said that it was green, this would constitute a false vision, but the blue of the sky remains unaffected. No matter the subjective perception, the truth of nature remains unchanged. In this way, Ruskin gave a primacy to the real in the natural world. He began his study of art, not by looking at reproductions in books, but by directly observing the natural landscapes before him. A painter must see accurately; in this way they paint the truth of an image. But "accurate" does not mean a faithful imitation. For Ruskin this was the mistake that young painters made. In J.M.W. Turner, Ruskin found a painter opposed to imitation in painting, and who sought to go beyond the materiality of nature, to express the light at the origin of things.

For Ruskin, Turner's paintings represented a truth about nature, but not in how "real" the painting appeared to one's common view of nature. So then, for Ruskin, what is its truth, how can it be a true form of seeing? In fact, a Turner paint-

2 Ruskin used the word "truth" in two ways: He distinguished between the essence of a thing when talking about the materiality of it and the aspect of something which, for J.M.W. Turner, had more to do with the immateriality of objects in nature. In this essay, truth is used to signify this latter sense of the word.

ing approaches the condition of "unreality." He is not painting merely what exists, what experience and custom has taught him, but what he actually sees. The immateriality of Turner's paintings does not mean that he does not paint the truth. He is concerned with light and shade, the essence of the real. He retains the darkness and the luminosity of an object, however immaterial it appears on the canvas. As if to say that if one would truly see the natural world, one would realize that it is fundamentally a play of light and darkness, irrespective of the material weight of objects.

Why paint from nature, if one attempted to mimic nature? A painting of a rose cannot compete with a real rose. Turner's paintings are suggestive by pointing to the mysteries that lie beyond the painted image, what can only be realized if we strip away the weight of the material, the illusion of it, and penetrate to the center, to an original, metaphysical Light. This is the spirituality of Turner: His paintings approach the condition of the origin of the world, before the cosmic egg cracked and unleashed duality upon the world. His paintings ultimately represent a harmonious, unified picture of the natural world as seen from the *viewpoint* of heaven, that is, the Infinite, filtered, of course, through the human, and thus necessarily imperfect. Nevertheless, in *Modern Painters,* Ruskin writes, "This infinite universe is unfathomable, inconceivable, in its whole; every human creature must slowly spell out, and long contemplate, such part of it as may be possible for him to reach; … extricating it from infinity, as one gathers a violet out of grass."

The whole truth of a Turner painting is not contained in the parts but in the unity when they are seen from a distance, and where the confusion and chaos then disappear. In *Modern Painters,* Ruskin writes: "Turner, and Turner only, would rather follow and render on the canvas that mystery of decided line, that distinct, sharp, visible, but unintelligible and inextricable richness, which, examined part by part, is to the eye nothing but confusion and defeat, which, taken as a whole, is all unity, symmetry, and truth." In a Turner painting the foreground is collapsed and the scene is often viewed from a distance, some-

times a great distance. This is why objects often appear "indistinct," and as if enveloped in mist. Turner approaches an infinite distance, the point of view of something greater than himself. Ruskin, in *Modern Painters,* writes, "If you watch any object as it fades in distance, it will lose gradually its force, its intelligibility, its anatomy, its whole comprehensible being; but it will never lose its gradation of light." This light is the truth of the nature of things.

Turner does not violate nature in his paintings but preserves the mystery of the natural world: its fundamental unknowability. We find in our present world that physics have come to the same conclusion about the unknown as a fundamental aspect of the material world. If we consider the subatomic realm, we know that uncertainty plays a fundamental part: If we know the position of a subatomic particle we cannot know its velocity at the same time. A fundamental unknown is built into the process not by man but by nature. Furthermore, though quantum mechanics is a system that works in describing the subatomic world, physicists do not know why it works. It is a mysterious world that defies manmade laws. Not even the sophisticated tools of physicists can penetrate the source of nature's mysteries, or bring to light what nature wants to keep hidden. Their tools, like a camera, are insufficient, for reproducing nature.

In volume IV of *Modern Painters,* Ruskin poses the question "Why is it that a photograph always looks clear and sharp — not at all like a Turner?" before contending that photographs might after all be more on Turner's side than he and other critics might first have thought:

> Photographs never look entirely sharp; but because clearness is supposed a merit in them, they are usually taken from very clearly marked and un-Turnerian subjects; and such results as are misty and faint, though often precisely those which contain the most subtle renderings of nature, are thrown away, and the clear ones only are preserved. Those clear ones depend for much of their force on the faults of the process. Photography either exaggerates shadows, or loses detail in

> the lights … and misses certain of the utmost subtleties of natural *effect* (which are often the things that Turner has chiefly aimed at) while it renders subtleties of *form* which no human could achieve.

While in Venice, working on what would become the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice,* Ruskin took many photographs (early daguerreotypes) of the various churches and cathedrals. So for him the camera had a specific, utilitarian purpose in capturing as clear an image of a church so that he could study the details. Of course this was useful to Ruskin with regard to buildings and cathedrals, solid structures. But Ruskin believed, with respect to nature painting, that drawing natural objects with a pencil on paper, as Turner often did, was preferable to taking a photograph and working from its reproduced image. This was because he realized that the mechanical device of the camera always desired a "perfect" and thus a false image. It was a flaw in the mechanics: what the camera reproduced was not true with regard to nature because it "exaggerates shadows, or loses detail in the lights." But Ruskin realized that a "delicately taken photograph of a truly Turnerian subject is far more like Turner in the drawing than it is to a work of any other artist." This is because Turner is not concerned with imitation.

These "unclear" images from the camera were the ones that were generally not considered or thrown away; these "Turnerian" effects were considered errors. Ruskin is aware of the problematic nature of the photographic image. Like a painter who attempts to realistically depict an image, the photographic image the camera produces is flawed. But this imperfect image is, for Ruskin, the representation of a truth. Photographs that are imperfect have an element of surprise. And these imperfect effects of blurring or mistiness contained in the photograph, and inherent to the camera, ultimately produced a Turnerian image. In its search for the perfect image, which a digital camera can seemingly produce, all imperfection, which for Ruskin was a sign of the spiritual nature in man, disappears. It is much the

same thing with high-definition videos. What do the processes of bloom and decay in the natural world have to do with an image that is photoshopped and clear? One might ask if such an image has become preferable to the actual. Has the simulation replaced the real? I will return to this subject later in this essay.

For Ruskin, the imperfection of the photographic image of nature was in keeping with what he conceived of as a universal law which he also applied to his study of Gothic architecture. He writes in *The Stones of Venice*:

> Accept this then for a universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it is imperfect; and let us be prepared for the otherwise strange fact, which we shall discern clearly as we approach the period of the Renaissance, that the first cause of the fall of the arts of Europe was a relentless requirement of perfection, incapable alike either of being silenced by veneration for greatness, or softened into forgiveness of simplicity.

Ruskin writes about the improvisational work of the laborers who created ornaments on the Gothic buildings: "So that, in the best of times of Gothic, a useless window would rather have been opened in an unexpected place for the sake of the surprise, than a useful one forbidden for the sake of symmetry." There laborers did not derive their knowledge from art books, nor were they studied in the finer aspects of European art. From the point of view of "civilized peoples," they were savages. Ruskin suggests that the word "Goth" was initially a form of contempt. But in the best Gothic cathedrals, their kind of savage intensity had a spiritual basis in the disciplined Christian faith. What Ruskin values in these Gothic buildings is the imperfection of the architecture. But, as I have suggested, imperfection is not the same as false seeing. These laborers had nature on their mind, the rough and wild landscapes of the North, when designing ornaments, not ideas of perfect symmetry. Thus like the blurs and scratches in a photo, this imperfection was the result of the work of these laborers. In this way, like Turner, they produced

a kind of spiritual light that is not transparent but imperfect as against the attempts to create imitative, perfect art. The Renaissance, with its scientific ideas of accurate perspective and symmetry, all but destroyed this view of art. For the laborers, it was a respect for the invisible mysteries and because of their Christian faith that they created an intensely spiritual art. Of the power of these "savage" artists, Ruskin, in *Modern Painters,* writes that it "neither comprehended or ruled itself, but worked and wandered as it listed, like mountain streams and winds; and which could not rest in the expression or seizure of finite form…Its imagery was taken from the shadows of the storms and hills, and had fellowship with the night and day of the earth itself." These laborers respected the invisible and knew what they could represent in nature and what they couldn't represent (the infinite). For Ruskin, "there is a continual mystery caused throughout *all* spaces [in a Turner painting], caused by the absolute infinity of things. WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY." The infinite cannot be seen clearly, or represented, only suggested. They were men who knew their work was being done in the service of something higher. The savage wildness, and spiritual intensity of these laborers was not compatible with a mind obsessed with perfection in things.

In our largely secular world, perfection seems the ultimate goal of all media. Digital space is immaterial and pure, but behind that there is nothing; time in the digital world is theoretically infinite but it is a false infinity without any relation to the spiritual. Our sense of time and space is completely destabilized with the creation of a seamless digital world where there is no loss, no time wasted, no decay, and thus, against nature and illusory. Reality itself has changed into something else. Consciousness has altered in the digital age. We have become less aware of our surroundings, less conscious of the people we encounter, less conscious of nature. The natural world has all but disappeared. In fact nothing is natural in the simulated world of the digital. The digital world ends up being an *extreme* version of the possibilities in the real world, particularly the ones related to power. After all, virtual love (or virtual sex) will always remain

virtual unless it leaves that space (which is hard to do now) and though virtual manipulation may remain subliminal, that does not make it any less real.

Ruskin, speaking of the industrialization of his own time, mentions the creation of factories, railroads that plowed through untouched nature, the increasing poverty and poor living conditions of the laborers, and a society that was becoming increasingly secular, where "human work has accordingly hardly any reference to spiritual beings, but is either done from a patriotic or personal interest, — either to benefit mankind, or reach some selfish end, not (I speak of human work in the broad sense) to please the gods." Because, at least since René Descarte's famous "cogito ergo sum," in which the thinking mind became isolated from the object before it, there was a tendency for man to dominate nature, in an attempt to make nature *more* perfect than it is. The digital world has all but erased nature. But nature will not be altered nor reveal all of its secrets.

At this moment, sitting at my desk, I look out the same window, and see a shadow cast onto the lawn, now partly green and partly brownish-yellow. Winter is approaching. The tall trees in the distance are, as before, indistinct in their specific features, but outlined sharply against a blue sky with streaks of white clouds. The air is cool, fifty-seven degrees. It is 12:19 p.m. I'm thinking of Ruskin's phrase, quoted above, WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY, and that it is a key to his thought: Every attempt by science, to explain, analyze, categorize, philosophize, conduct experiments on objects or phenomena, all this, eventually comes up against a blank wall. There is always *something* that eludes their grasp, something that they cannot see. There is no perfect experiment that will explain everything in the universe. Physicists have not solved the essential problem of gravity, and so no Unified Law of Physics exists. Randomness is a better guess to explain the world than any regularity of patterns. So as hard as we look we can't see clearly the entire picture. Some things can exist and be seen; others cannot and any attempt to represent them will lead to failure. Call what cannot be seen heaven, the invisible or the infinite or finally, God, but language

falls short of any satisfactory word. We literally can't know. It is like an eternal oversight in the mind. It is the one piece, without which the puzzle cannot be explained, cannot be found, because it *does not exist* or, rather, this *lack of existence* is its very nature. It exists by not existing.

It was a problem for Ruskin that painters were focused on what existed instead of attempting to *see* what was in front of them. For Ruskin, attempting to represent the truth did not so much involve *thinking,* or an intellectual exercise, but *seeing*. Ruskin complains that "painters, to the last hour of their lives, are apt to fall in some degree into the error of painting what exists, rather than what they can see." To attempt this kind of imitation of what exists, was for Ruskin a kind of trickery. For Turner, painting the immateriality of light and shadow was one way of expressing or suggesting the ineffable. That which cannot be thought can nevertheless be represented in a painting, but not clearly. That is why in Turner's paintings mist seems to envelop the natural world. This mist exists between ourselves and the infinite. But from this unknowing is born desire. It is from the intensity of desire that we sense intimations of something greater than ourselves, and that we are ultimately in service to something higher, that we can feel but not see clearly. But that does not mean *it* is any less *real*.

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31

"And in a heap cam on them with a swack"

Notes on a Few Passages in Gavin Douglas's *Aeneid* with Some Brief Examples of Its Influence

When Gavin Douglas began his translation of the *Aeneid* in 1511, finishing some time before 1513, James IV was the king of Scotland and the relations with England were stable.[1] It was a golden age of artistic freedom where multilingualism and cultural diversity became the norm. It was a world in which people could be addressed as French, English, and Scots. There was no standard English being spoken, but rather a conglomerate of languages, so Douglas created his translation in a linguistically fertile time. But his core vocabulary is of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) origin: These linguistic changes in the Middle English have been linked to the influence of the eighth- and ninth-century Viking invaders who conquered territories in the vicinities of Northumbria, Lincolnshire, and East Anglia. In addition to the

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2022.

Anglo-Saxon influence in his translation, we will also see words from other languages, such as French. England was conquered by the Norman French at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and as a result Anglo-Saxon was supplanted by a hybrid language that borrowed much from French vocabulary and syntax. As John Corbett writes, in *Written in the Language of the Scottish Nation: A History of Literary Translation into Scots,* "It would have been impossible for Douglas to restrict himself to 'Scottis' in a linguistic environment where there was not yet a fully developed standard language, either in England or Scotland." There had also been a French *Eneas* in the twelfth century and an Irish version before 1400, but Douglas's translation was the first translation into a language resembling English as we know it.

Virgil's *Aeneid* is in dactylic hexameter, as are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Douglas's translation of Virgil is in decasyllabic rhyming couplets. He translates:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit
Litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
Vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;

As:

The battles and the man I will descrive
Frae Troy's bounds first that — fugitive
By fate — to Italy cam and coast Lavine,
Ower land and sea catchit (driven) with meikle (much) pain,
By force of gods above, frae every steid (side),
Of cruel Juno through auld-remembrit feid. (hatred, rage)

In Douglas's translation there is a build-up of words that give weight to the line. The first line in Virgil's *Aeneid* is "Arma virumque cano," frequently translated in modern times as a variation on "I sing of arms and the man." Douglas translates this line as "The battles and the man I will descrive." The word

"descrive" means "to represent orally or by writing"; it is an Old French word whose origin dates back to the thirteenth century. So Douglas captures in this word, departing from a literal rendering of "cano" as "song," both the idea of an oral tradition, as well as a written language. Douglas translates "fato profugus" as "fugitive / By fate," retaining the "f" sound and picking up the "fug" from "profugus" in "fugitive." He translates "multum ille et terries iactatus et alto" (literally "much was he tossed over land and the deep" ["alto," means deep as in "the deep sea"]) as "ower land and sea catchit (driven) with meikle (much) pain." Douglas reads "pain" in being tossed (or battered) which makes sense and gives the translation its vigorous strength. He translates "Litora (shore)" as "coast" and picks up the hard "c" in "catchit" and the hard "k" sound in "meikle." Douglas translates "Vi superum saevae" (from the gods) as "By force of gods above, frae every steid (side)"; his addition is implied in the Latin as the gods are all knowing and all seeing, from above and all around, from every side.

There is alliteration in Douglas and his translation is also creative, but he is essentially faithful and the rhythm also approximates that of the Latin. As Ezra Pound writes, in *ABC of Reading,* "Gavin Douglas, set on a particular labour, with his mind full of Latin quantitative metre, attains a robuster versification than you are likely to find in Chaucer." Douglas's hard consonants impact each other to create a startling effect of presence, almost imagistic: "Ower land and sea catchit (driven) with meikle (much) pain, / By force of gods above, frae every steid (side)." This is not Chaucer's "Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth / Inspired hath in every holt and heeth," with its sound from the Norman French influence that shows in the softening of the consonants. And even prior to the Norman conquest rhyming had begun to replace alliteration as the distinguishing literary device of English verse. Douglas's line is vigorous, vibrant. He is versatile with his sounds. His hard consonants give substance to the line; we feel its impact, its projective force.

Douglas's influence on Ezra Pound is well known. Pound's translation of "The Seafarer," an Old English poem from the

tenth-century *Book of Exeter,* was indebted to Douglas's sense of rhythm and sound:

> May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
> Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
> Hardship endured oft.
> Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
> Known on my keel many a care's hold,
> And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
> Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship's head
> While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,
> My feet were by frost benumbed.

Here we have the use of alliteration sometimes extending from one line to the next as in "harsh days / hardship endured oft," and in the line "Narrow nightwatch nigh." Here, Pound's meter reminds one of the accentual meter based on Anglo-Saxon poetry. Another contemporary heir to Gavin Douglas's rhythmic and sonic palette was the poet Basil Bunting, born in Scotswood-on-Tyne, Northumberland. The following is his poem, "Coda":

> A strong song tows
> us, long earsick.
> Blind, we follow
> rain slant, spray flick
> to fields we do not know.
>
> Night, float us.
> Offshore wind, shout,
> ask the sea
> what's lost, what's left,
> what horn sunk,
> what crown adrift.
>
> Where we are who knows
> of kings who sup

while day fails? Who,
swinging his axe
to fell kings, guesses
where we go?

One can clearly see the ghost of Old Scots in Bunting's English. Compare Bunting's "Coda" (1967) to Douglas's *Aeneid,* from 1513:

Heich (high) as a hill the jaw of water brak (break)
And in a heap cam on them with a swack.
Some heezit (lifted) hovering on the waws heicht, (high waves)
And some the sucking sea sae law gart licht (made to descend so low)
Then seemit the earth openit amid the flood;

Douglas has that wonderfully evocative word, "heezit" which means "lifted." Bunting uses the word "earsick." Both are similar in their sonic effect, using the sound of the hard consonants to give the line weight, dimension. Earsick is a neologism which is immediate in its sense, while "heezit" is used to express the lifting of a boat by the waves; you can feel the sense of heaviness, of even exhaustion, in pronouncing the word. There's another wonderfully vivid word in the Douglas excerpt: "swack," which is a Scots word close to our "whack." Bunting writes, "rain slant, spray flick"; it's something that could have come right out of Douglas. With "swack" Douglas is embodying the actual sound of the waves hitting the ships with great force. The soft "sw" is the sound of the wind; Aeolus, god of the wind, is causing the waves to overturn the ships of Aeneas's men. The hard "ck" is the sound of the hard impact of the wave on the ship. The word "swack" creates an effective visual image that is immediately sensed. Douglas's couplet is: "Heich (high) as a hill the jaw of water brak / And in a heap cam on them with a swack." Through this complex metaphor made up of "jaw" and "water,"

we are kept aware of the god Aeolus's presence, though he is not named, as well as the effect of his blowing on the waves, and the enormity of his power. "Brak" and "swack" complete the rhyme and suggest the waves breaking against the ships with great force, and the eventual destruction of them. I hear the rhyme as the sound of catastrophe and I remember the cause of this was Juno's anger.

Furthermore Douglas writes the "sucking sea." The waves are actually sucking the ships into the depths of the ocean. Douglas also writes, "The sucking swelch sank under sea and drowned"; the word "swelch" means whirlpool. The alliterative effect of this line is immediate on the reader's ear. The "s" sound is carried along in "sucking swelch sank." Collectively, these words express the effect of the wind on the vast turbulent ocean (this is the sound of the undulating waves); the ships are being tossed into the depths of the whirlpool. The word "swelch" suggests a crushing effect. Also, in pronouncing the word slowly the mouth simulates a kind of sucking sound, "the jaw of water." You can also hear as you pronounce the word the effect of the "ch" sound; this is the side of the ship cracking as it's being sucked into the whirlpool. And "swe" is the sound of the great force of the waves guided by Aeolus's breath. Finally, it is as if the actual "earth openit (opened) amid the flood." It is a startling image that reminds one of Dante's descent into hell.

Douglas is versatile in his use of language. He not only gives shape to his images but also a three-dimensional quality. He is able to embody in the very sound of the words the motion and power of the waves crashing against the ships, and the presence of the god, Aeolus. It is no wonder that his influence can be felt in certain types of poetry that are based on a meter similar to the Anglo-Saxon rather than the iambic pentameter or blank verse, the dominant strains of English poetry in the centuries after Douglas. Samuel Johnson would say in 1778, "I think Heroick poetry is best in blank verse; yet it appears that rhyme is essential to English poetry, from our deficiency in metrical quantities." Ezra Pound, who was the first poet to draw attention to the value of Douglas's translation would write about him,

in 1917, in his essay, "Notes on Elizabethan Classicists," "I am inclined to think that he gets more poetry out of Virgil than any other translator. At least he gives one a clue to Dante's respect for the Mantuan."

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32

Notes on John Wieners's "A Poem for Painters" in *Selected Poems 1958–1984* (Black Sparrow Press, 1986) Written after Reading Bill Berkson's *Sudden Address* (Cuneiform Press, 2010)

In "A Poem for Painters," John Wieners writes[1]:

> Paul Klee scratched for seven years
> on smoked glass, to develop
> his line, LaVigne says, look
> at his face! He who has spent
> all night drawing mine.

In his diary of 1906, Klee wrote about his "reverse glass paintings": "Besides, I moved with the utmost zeal on the smoothest surface, on glass, simplified, threw off ballast, until little or none remained." Wieners put it this way: "My poems contain no // wilde beastes, no / lady of the lake music / of the spheres, or organ chants." Robert LaVigne, an American artist associ-

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2021.

ated with the Beats and the avant-garde scene in San Francisco, stayed with Wieners at the Hotel Wentley (Weiners's first collection of poetry, written while at the hotel, was published in 1958 and called *The Hotel Wentley Poems,* with a cover by LaVigne). In the quote above, Wieners's use of the word "line" can apply both to a line of poetry (the poet working on his line), as well as to color (LaVigne working on his paintings, perfecting his line), thus connecting the work of both painter and poet. Furthermore, as Wieners writes, LaVigne draws him; poetry and painting are in a symbiotic relationship. Bill Berkson, in *Sudden Address,* writes "Poetry and Painting — the 'interrelation of the arts' happens when everyone has to take their ideas out for a walk." In the following lines, Wieners's description of the rising sun over the rooftops and his emotional state occur in terms of color:

> The sun also
> rises on the rooftops, beginning
> w/ violet. I begin in blue
> knowing why we are cool.

Berkson, quoting Gertrude Stein, writes, "A writer should write with his eyes." The sun begins with violet and furthermore, Wieners writes, "I begin in blue / knowing why we are cool." "Blue" suggests a state of despair but to "begin in blue" also suggests Wieners is using language as a painter would. He is speaking about the tone of the poem as expressing an emotional state. Here "knowing" is also related to the color "blue," but this is not intellectual knowledge but self-knowledge, gnosis.

The poets and painters at this time ('50s and '60s) also were concerned with the new possibilities of space in their works. Gone was the concern with realism in painting or meter in poetry. Charles Olson famously wrote, "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America." Helen Frankenthaler, an American abstract expressionist painter, has spoken of being inspired by Jackson Pollock to take the canvas off the wall and place it on the floor; this closes the gap between the artist and

the canvas, making the body, with its movements, central in the creation of the painting. No longer upright, vertical, distant, but rather flat, horizontal, on the ground, as the canvas is, the artist's body is now closer to the open space of the canvas. In fact, Frankenthaler has spoken of how it seemed as though, the canvas being on the ground, the space was opening up all around her. The classic image of the painter as distant from the painting, in contemplation of the blank canvas with his palette in hand, a kind of romantic conceit, as he asserted his dominance over nature, over the materials, is now replaced by the painter or poet entering the very chaos of the white canvas (the page), and the risk that this involves. It is a more physical relation to painting, to color. As Stéphane Mallarmé said to Edgar Degas, "poems are made with *words,* not ideas."

Now, we can begin to speak of the scale of the poem, in the same sense as we would speak of a painting, in terms of the "live aspect of size in painting." Here is the block of prose-like poetry that signals a change in scale from what came before:

> South of Mission, Seattle,
> over the Sierra Mountains,
> the Middle West and Michigan,
> moving east again, easy
> coming into Chicago and
> the cattle country, calling
> to each other over canyons,
> careful not to be caught
> at night, they are still out,
> the destroyers, and down
> into the South, familiar land,
> lush places, blue mountains
> of Carolina, into Black Mountain
> and you can sleep out, or
> straight across into States

The passage is literally and figuratively, "a real travelogue in scale." In his imagination, Wieners moves from the enclosed

space of the Hotel Wentley to the wide-open fields of America. It is a trajectory from the local to the universal, from the self to the cosmos, and ultimately, in the poem, from the "I" to the "we." One can say that the scale of the poem grew larger to encompass a wider field of emotional experience. Berkson writes:

> There's an "everything" principle — the universal "everything" principle — that poetry and painting share. It has to do with including. Fairfield Porter says, "There is an elementary principle of organization in any art that nothing gets in anything else's way, and everything is at its own limit of possibilities" [Weiners writes "Let me ramble here. / yet stay within my own yardlines."] Any divergence from the "everything" principle is obfuscation, which often is necessary as a ground swell, to add surface.

This divergence, or shift in scale, away from the lyrical and emotional intensity of the previous lines, gives the poem a surface, a weight; the block of prose is like a broad stroke of the brush, saturated with color, across the canvas. This unifies or "connects the dots" between the lyrical passages and the block of prose-like poetry, opening up the field of the poem. Furthermore, Berkson, speaking of the American painter, Phillip Guston, writes: "Everything is standing stock-still in the freeze-frame, but 'we can move everywhere as in life.'" In Wieners's poem, the block of poetry is like a freeze-frame, a way of grounding the poem, that changes the rhythm, and slows down the tempo of the poem. It is "respect for the whole inexhaustible but truly personal limited surface of what's at hand." Wieners writes:

> This nation is so large, like
> our hands, our love it lives
> with no lover, looking only
> for the beloved, back home
> into the heart, New York,
> New England, Vermont green
> mountains, and Massachusetts

my city, Boston and the sea.
again to smell what this calm
ocean cannot tell us. The seasons.
only the heart remembers
and records in words
of works
we lay down for those men
who can come to them.

Here, Wieners's "orientation to things and space" is "something you can see as a passing flash in everyday life." It is a view from the car as it is travelling on the highway; the flashing images evoke memories of home and of travel. But the description of geographical space shifts to a lyrical intensity, to personal space. It is a change in perspective and tone. Furthermore, "the approach is immediate and unfussed. No obfuscation. The subject is simple and inexhaustible; the whole image strikes the eye and mind instantly in equal measure like a natural light."

Berkson, writing about Frank O'Hara, says, "If the poem has a hero, as it sometimes flirtatiously proclaims, that person is astir in his own and the worlds simultaneities — all shifters and syntax, sometimes dangerously overboard: 'A hit? *Ergo* swim.'" This is what you do when, as Ted Berrigan, quoted by Berkson, writes, "The fucking enemy shows up." In "A Poem for Vipers" Wieners writes: "Soon I know the fuzz will / interrupt, will arrest Jimmy and / I will be placed on probation. The poem / does not lie to us." Berkson writes, in "History and Truth,"

> Frank O'Hara's most cogent political statement, 'The truth is face to face' serves by extension for the truth of art and poetry. Truth is face to face with every facet — or nuance — of fact. By nuance, every word of a poem gathers the poem's surface energy.

Wieners writes: "Let us stay with what we know." The fact of the poem itself is truth; it does not lie to us. The fact of his impend-

ing arrest, presumably for possession of drugs or homosexuality, is faced head on, accepted even as the fate for such as himself, the *poète maudit,* since he will be "placed on probation." He knows the score. Wieners concludes the poem in this way: "We lie under / its law [the poem], alive in the glamour of this hour / able to enter into the sacred places / of his dark people, who carry secrets / glassed in their eyes and hide words / under the coats of their tongue." The secret is in the "eyes" and words are hidden under the tongue. Berkson writes, quoting Robert Smithson, "'The word color at its origin means to 'cover' or 'hide'; matter eats up light and covers it with a confusion of color." He is, of course, talking about painting, but here in Wieners's poem, the mouth is closed, and the secret is contained in the visual. Presumably the eyes are glassy because of the influence of drugs or tears. In the latter case, the source of the pain is kept a secret, hidden from the light.

In "Poem for Painters" Weiners is adept at the long shot and the close-up, as well as the tracking shot, as the scale shifts from the local to the universal. Wieners confronts the poem face to face. The language is not stationary but fluid, altering in scale; it does not simulate a classical painting or poem where the eye is guided in its movement. The movement of the eye does not follow a set pattern. It is governed by the breath not the meter, not by fixed geometrical space. The placement of the words on the page suggests the extension of the line in a painterly manner:

> At last the game is over
>
> and the line lengthens.

The extension of the line to the right of the page is not merely an affect. It shows, in a subtle visual way, that the line has changed, moved, shifted the scale of the poem. These visual effects have their analogue in painting. Berkson writes, "Everything you believe about space is so Latinate." In *Braque and Others: Selected Art Writings of Trevor Winkfield (1990–2009),* Winkfield, a British artist writes, "Braque rightly dismissed Renaissance perspective as a 'ghastly mistake.'" Wieners opened up the

space of the poem, following Olson's dictum: "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge."

At the same time novelists were trying to break away from the nineteenth-century novel, and its idea of fully developed characters and a narrative based on clearly defined causes and effects. These included Fielding Dawson, Michael Rumaker, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Robert Creeley, Paul Metcalf, and later, Kathy Acker and her use of collage, and many others, including Wieners himself, in his occasional prose writings, such as "A Superficial Estimation" or "Cultural Affairs in Boston." But a discussion of this is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, the work of poets, painters, and novelists were undergoing a radical change in the '50s and '60s, and later in the late '70s. "A Poem for Painters," written in 1958, is a central and important poem, in this respect, and was included in Weiners's first collection of poetry.

My reading of Bill Berkson's *Sudden Address* was the inspiration for this essay. It is his reading of the relation between poetry and painting that gave rise to my thinking about Wieners's poem in a new light, in relation to painting. In fact, many of the quotes above, from *Sudden Address,* dealing with painters like Phillip Guston, or poets like Frank O'Hara, applied to Wieners's poem. This is not surprising since many of the poets and painters were working out new ideas at this time, whether it was at Black Mountain College or in San Francisco or in the New York School. Wieners could have been speaking for all of them when he wrote: "I go out of bounds // without defense, oh attack." Many poets such as James Schuyler and Barbara Guest wrote for art magazines. I am also reminded, more recently, of *Baffling Means,* a collaboration between Clark Coolidge and Phillip Guston, published in 1991. But, finally, the connection between poetry and painting, as Berkson writes, "lies elsewhere, with materials which criticism is ever hard put to recognize, because criticism most often doesn't, as art will, talk about everything at once."

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33

A Note on the Figure of King Arthur in Jack Spicer's *The Holy Grail*

In Malory's *Le morte d'Arthur,* Mordred and Agravaine eventually tell King Arthur about Guinevere's affair with Lancelot and Arthur sentences her to death by burning her alive. Lancelot's party raids the execution and kills many knights including Gareth and Gaheris, Gawain's brothers. Gawain, seeking revenge, precipitates a war between Arthur and Lancelot; Gawain is killed in a duel with Lancelot, and Mordred seizes the throne, thus taking control of Arthur's kingdom. A bloody final battle ensues between the followers of Mordred and the loyalists in England who were faithful to Arthur. Arthur kills Mordred but is gravely wounded in the fight. As Arthur lays dying, the lone survivor, Bedivere, throws away the sword, Excalibur, and Morgan and Nimue (The Lady of the Lake) then appear in a boat to take Arthur to Avalon ("Avalon has / Supermarkets — where the dead trade bones with the dead. / Where the heros / Ask nothing.") Jack Spicer's "The Book of the Death of Arthur" is probably the darkest series of poems in *The Holy Grail.* Many of the knights are dead and his kingdom is temporarily without a leader: "I am king / Of a grey city in the history books called Camelot / The door, by no human hand, / Open." Like Guinevere he is surrounded by spooks that animate them-

selves. He wonders what it all meant, these grail-searchers on a fool's errand searching for fool's gold: "The answer-question always the same. I cannot remember when I was not a king. The sword in the rock is like a children's story told by my mother." A sense of his mortality sets in, destroying the illusion of a mysterious grail that will promise the knight who finds it immortality. Spicer intervenes in the poem, with a comment: "Plainly we are dealing with materials distorted from their original form." There are many sources upon which the grail legend is based, one of the earliest being the unfinished romance, *Perceval, le Conte du Graal,* by Chrétien de Troyes, written around 1190. The story probably originated as a folktale in Ireland, before being written down sometime in 1056, in a work entitled, *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom.* But the larger issue at stake for Spicer is the problem of knowledge: the paucity of what we actually know is true or accurate, and how knowledge is altered when it passes through the centuries, before the printing press formalized the written word. What we know is unstable, the language is unstable. It controls us, we do not control it. And language is no help at all in solving any problem, ontological or otherwise. Spicer/Arthur writes: "I have forgotten why the grail was important / Why somebody wants to reach it like a window you throw open. Thrown open / What would it mean?" What does it mean? Is it real or a hoax? Is it love? Desire? It is all of these things at the same time and none of them also. It is no thing, a "noise in the head of the prince." But the "blackness remains":

> Not lost battles or even defeated people
> But blackness alive with itself
> At the sides of our fires.
> At home with us
> And a monstrous anti-grail none of those knights could
> have met or invented
> As real as tomorrow.
> Not the threat of death. They could have conquered that.
> Not even bad magic.

It is a simple hole running from one thing to another. No
kingdom will be saved.
No rest-
Titution.

Something remains, when everything has been destroyed, and all attempts to find the mysterious grail have failed: God-language. The poetry of what is not there. The darkness from which is born the light. An anti-grail. There is no relief, no stability, no great achievement at the end of the road to imbue your life with meaning. Just this darkness to remind the poet of what is not there, what can never be found. He remains unfulfilled. You felt you were so close, the grail seemed yours, as close as lip to cup. Spicer/Arthur writes: "It annoys me to look at this country. Dead Branches. Leaves unable even to grimly seize their rightful place in the tree of the heart." There has been no revelation, nothing has changed, the poet is left with the same unanswered questions, or are they the wrong answers to the wrong questions? The poet has "forgotten why the grail was important." Avalon contains supermarkets now, the mystery has been drained of all its power; what is important now is the money, the exchange, amassing capital. Humans are cruel to one another in such pursuits. Love is not possible between them. Was the grail just a hoax set into motion centuries ago for some purpose we can no longer discern? Probably to control us or better yet, to confuse us. It is something like a "noise in the head of the prince." This "slumbering apprentice never dared to tell the master." It is "Something in God-language. In spite of all this horseshit, this uncomfortable music." Here language stops. Nothing more can be said about this noise. The poet has reached the edge of the shore. The wide ocean is before him, and the growing darkness. Words are broken up like pieces of glass on the beach. Watch your step.

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34

"The Creative Use of Reality"

On Mark Alice Durant's *Maya Deren, Choreographed for Camera* (Saint Lucy Books, 2022)

While reading Mark Alice Durant's loving portrait of Maya Deren, I was reminded of all the days and nights I spent as a teenager at Anthology Film Archives where I saw all of Maya Deren's films.[1] She was important to me when I started making short experimental films with a small point-and-shoot Canon camera. Working with no money, I had to use what was available. I began with shooting friends and then, in my later films, dispensed with "actors" entirely; I used myself as an "actor" when needed, or random people on the street. I usually follow my instinct rather than a prepared script. In fact, I've never made a film with a script of any kind. In this Maya Deren's work was always an inspiration.

Experimental filmmakers in the '60s worked to dismantle the influence of the Hollywood film which stood for popular

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2023.

entertainment, inflated budgets, hackneyed plots, and behind it all a faceless director orchestrating his puppet show. These filmmakers created films in opposition to what they saw as an attack on personal freedom, on the self. They galvanized around the idea of the inviolability of the self. The small personal films of Jonas Mekas were called film diaries; Stan Brakhage emerged from the lyrical film to become an essayist of the ontological; Kenneth Anger explored the spiritual nature of the self in his own films and through his exploration of the works of Aleister Crowley; Harry Smith revitalized the art of animation in films which also contained mystical and occult symbols, and he was also a disciple of Aleister Crowley; and Bruce Connor legitimized the use of found footage with his politically charged yet undidactic interpretations of current events. One also thinks here of Marie Menken's wit; Joseph Cornell, whose work was entirely created from found footage; Carolee Schneeman's feminist cinema, which included the films *Meat Joy* and *Interior Scroll,* in which she explored the body, sexuality, and gender; and the great erotic force of James Broughten's films. But towering above them all, because she was the first to theorize about and make experimental films, is, of course, Maya Deren. Stan Brakhage called her the "mother of us all" by which he meant that Deren, with her seven completed films, her countless essays on experimental film, her lectures and workshops, her forays into finding distribution for experimental films, as well as her interest in ritual, and the nature of the cinematic image, did more than anyone else during her lifetime to promote and expand the interest in experimental film.

She was born Eleanora Derenkowsky (April 29, 1917, in Kiev, Ukraine – October 13, 1961, in New York City). The Derenkowsky family fled the Ukraine, because of the Russian Revolution, and arrived in Syracuse in New York State in 1922, where they stayed with relatives. An important woman that Eleanora met, early in her life, was Katherine Dunham, an American dancer, choreographer, author, anthropologist, and social activist, who had one of the most successful dance careers in African American and European theater in the twentieth century, and

for many years directed her own dance company. As a young woman, Deren worked for her. What she learned was invaluable for a young woman in the 1940s. Durant writes:

> In Katherine Dunham, Deren discovered a model for her own ambitions. Dunham was a woman, artist and scholar, someone who could hold her own in the halls of academia, on the Broadway stage, and in the struggle for civil rights.

Deren had been an ardent socialist in the 1930s; there is a photo in the book of her marching and protesting for the socialist cause. Through various connections stemming from the initial meeting with Dunham, Eleonora met the Czech film director Alexander Hackenschmied, later Alexander (Shasha) Hammid, and they were married in 1942. She acquired a used 16 mm Bolex camera from her father's inheritance in 1943, which she used for all her films. Her first film, made with Hammid's help, was called *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) and is her most famous film. It is considered one of the best and most influential of American avant-garde films. Upon its completion, she took the first name Maya.

The importance of *Meshes of the Afternoon* cannot be overstated. At first she showed the film to friends at her Morton Street apartment in Greenwich Village. Through parties that she gave at her apartment — which were legendary — she would meet many of the important artists of the avant-garde of the twentieth century, such as Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and a young John Cage. She also met Hella Heyman, a cinematographer and actress, who helped her make *At Land* (1944) and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), as well as the dancer Talley Beatty, who was the subject for her film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945). Anaïs Nin would write about *Meshes of the Afternoon* and an early cut of *At Land*:

> We saw several of Maya Deren's films. Truly unconscious dream material, better in some ways than the early surrealist movies because there are no artificial effects, just a simple

> following of the threads of the fantasy … I see the influence of Cocteau, except that she will not resort to any symbolism or artifice to present the dream. The dream resembles realism …. A curious prosaic quality imposed upon the imagination.

It is a perceptive remark. Deren wanted to distance herself from surrealism, from the dominant theories of the "pope" of the movement, André Breton. Her films were not automatic games, Freudian tricks, or overloaded with symbolism. For Deren, the films had a logic all their own. They were carefully made, with attention to the image: A film was a series of images in time. The camera itself was the centerpiece, the magical tool that could transform reality.

A Study in Choreography for Camera is interesting in this respect. Deren films the dancer, but in the way she uses slow motion and quick cuts, she creates a film that is essentially about movement and longing. But this is not something that could be seen on a stage: "In this film, I have attempted to place a dancer in a limitless, cinematographic space. Moreover, he shares, with the camera, a collaborative responsibility for the movements themselves. This is, in other words, a dance which can only exist on film." The magic is in the use of the camera and the editing; it was Deren in conversation with the dancer. In this way, the primacy of the act of filming was given back to the filmmaker, the magician, and her use of the camera, with which she creates a new poetic language, and shows how film can be an art form in itself, not subservient to plot, dialogue, and dramatic action. In developing her ideas, Deren spoke of the distinction between a "vertical" and "horizontal" approach to filmmaking:

> Poetry, to my mind, is an approach to experience …. The distinction of poetry is its construction (what I mean by a "poetic structure"), and the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a "vertical" investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment, and is concerned with its qualities and its depth, so that you have

> poetry, in a sense, not with what is occurring but with what it feels like or what it means …. I would call this the "vertical" attack, and this may be a bit clearer if you will contrast it to what I would call the "horizontal" attack of drama, which is concerned with the development, let's say, within a very small situation from feeling to feeling.

For Maya Deren the vertical approach to filmmaking explored the image, in terms of its poetic resonance or the psychological and even mythological depth. In this way, her films resonate with a much larger world, not simply reduced to the materialistic, though that formed a part of it, but encompassing the divine or spiritual nature of the universe, instead of the narrow range of feeling often portrayed in Hollywood films.

Deren began as a poet, but she didn't consider herself a good poet. When she picked up the camera, she felt that she had arrived home. In other words, she found in filmmaking a way to express her vision without the need for words. The linear story, with its character development, narrative arc, and clearly defining setting, was something from the nineteenth-century novel. Deren writes, speaking of her film, *At Land*: "The ambition of this film is to eliminate, as far as possible, any literary-dramatic line and literal symbolic meanings, and to evolve, instead, a purely cinematic coherence and integrity." In a late text, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," Deren elaborates on this idea:

> If cinema is to take its place beside the others as a full-fledged art form, it must cease merely to record realities that owe nothing of their actual existence to the film instrument. Instead, it must create a total experience so much out of the very nature of the instrument as to be inseparable from its means. It must relinquish the imitation of the causal logic of narrative plots a form which flowered as a celebration of the earth-bound, step-by-step concept of time, space and relationship which was part of the primitive materialism of the nineteenth century.

Like literature, Hollywood films were interested primarily in a linear story, with drama, action, cheap thrills, and often a damsel in distress that needed a man to save the day. For Durant, "Deren sought to create a cinematic language free of the bonds of theater and literature." Furthermore, Durant writes, speaking of *Ritual in Transfigured Time,* that in "undermining the illusory naturalism of film, *Ritual*'s slow motion reveals film's seamless unfurling to be an accumulation of still images — a hallucination produced between the mechanical apparatus of cinema and the physiological limitations of human vision."

Deren was interested in Albert Einstein's theories of the universe, in which space had the ability to bend time. She would explore this in her films. For example, there is a scene in *At Land* (she had observed that she had done something similar in a sequence towards the end of *Meshes of the Afternoon*), where she is crawling on a dinner table, oblivious to the dinner guests on either side of her. As she crawls across the table, we see her face moving in an alternate space, among leaves and branches, as if she is moving in a forest. Through Deren's editing, she is made to move simultaneously in two separate spaces. Linear time breaks down. Therefore time isn't fixed. In Einstein's theory of relativity, this is called time dilation. She would explore these ideas further in terms of a space where gravity was affected, and where the dancers move freely as disembodied beings, in her film, *The Very Eye of Night* (1958). For Deren, the image, and its relation to space and time was central, and her camera itself was the magic tool that would allow her to creatively alter the nature of reality. For her, "the idiom is the visual and the instrument is the camera."

Deren was interested in ritual and magic. She was also interested in depersonalization and the transformation of the cinematic image. She writes in her chapbook, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film*:

> The ritualistic form treats the human being not as a source of dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in the dramatic whole. The intent of such a de-personaliza-

> tion is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension, and frees him from the specialization and confines of "personality."

Deren was not interested in creating characters, with defined identities, that act out their destinies on a movie screen. Instead she saw the people in her films as acting under the influence of a kind of external force which could be thought of as gods, though she never exactly defined them. Later, when she visited Haiti, she would experience this sense of "de-personalization" when she was possessed, surrendering herself to the Haitian spirit, Erzulie.

The alternative culture of these filmmakers also has its alternative spirituality: the *Yijing,* the works of Aleister Crowley and Madame Blavatsky, the ritual taking of drugs. Before these ideas and processes become popular in the culture, there was Maya Deren and her interest in Haitian voodoo, which led her to visit the country on several occasions, in the late '40s. These trips resulted in a book, *The Divine Horseman,* a reference to the Haitian spirit, Iwa, that rides a person who is possessed like a horse. Having shot a lot of footage of sacred ceremonies during her time in Haiti, she eventually decided not to make the film: How to document a religious ceremony? What to include and what not to include? Is there any way to do this without being subjective, and yet being faithful to what it is you're filming. How not, for example, to appear racist, in the depiction of the other, in the framing of another culture? She is dealing with a problem that Jean-Luc Godard would face years later when he attempted to make a political film about the Palestinians in *Ici et ailleurs* (Here and Elsewhere). Despite Deren's extensive research, and hours of filming, she writes:

> How can I say to these people that I am not an outsider, that I, too, am of the race of those whose bodies are ravaged by invisibles, by Gods, which are ideas too large for the human frame? That I, too, with the other artists, have known such agony, such loss of balance, such sense of the skin bursting

> with not being able to contain something more than human. And to whom could we cling until the last tremor had ceased and we were returned to ourselves again.

Her decision not to make the film was an ethical choice. She found it more satisfying to gain the trust of the Haitian priests, and to engage in the various dances and rituals, during which she writes that she was possessed by one of the spirits. This was a pivotal moment in her life. She writes, as a result of the possession she felt: "No fear, on contrary, sense of having known all this. Terrible peace, of being reclaimed. Sense, here of belonging to the elements and of surrender. And the voyage to nowhere. Between those realities, nothing real. Heart stretching to encompass its love."

Mark Alice Durant's compulsively readable biography of Maya Deren, *Choreographed for Camera,* with its many photos and film stills, including some of Deren's own photographs, will certainly excite those people with knowledge of her films. But this book is also for the average reader with an interest in film and it is my hope that it will make new fans of her work, who will seek out her films and books. As she once said: "I am not greedy. I do not seek to possess the major point of your days. I am content if, on those rare occasions whose truth can be stated only by poetry, you will, perhaps, recall an image, even only the aura of my films."

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35

A Person's Life Is Political

Notes on David Wojnarowicz's Work

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine.[1] It was an unprovoked attack that shocked the European community. As of this writing, Vladimir Putin continues to attack the Ukrainian people, who have shown great resistance to this attempt to destroy their identity and restore the Soviet empire. Putin's actions have brought back memories of the US's invasion of Iraq. But for me, and for artists like David Wojnarowicz, everything tracks back to the colonialism of the sixteenth century, the vast expansion that conceived of the world as mappable, measurable. Of course, the invention of any map or border involves the suppression of the native people. Wojnarowicz writes, in *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*: "Maps are part of the media world; people accept the implications of the forms outlined on paper as if they were an inherent truth … By tearing through maps I erase borders; borders that create ownership and wars." In Wojnarowicz's writing he attacks the notion of "border" as rigid, fabricated boundaries, imposed by governments, corporations, and religious

1 An earlier version of this essay was published in *Heavy Feather Review,* 2022.

authorities, to police behavior, enforce norms, and exclude those who fall outside them. Across his art, writing, and activism, he worked to expose and dismantle these constraints. His recurring use of maps (notably in *I Use Maps Because I Don't Know How to Paint,* 1984) treated them as emblems of state power: pre-set routes, fixed identities, national borders. By tearing, scrambling, and collaging these maps, he enacted a symbolic erasure of borders, proposing instead a condition of groundlessness, anarchy, and human connection beyond state control.

Reading David Wojnarowicz's work, I remember the political situation in the '80s: the Tompkins Square Riots, the AIDS crisis and the resultant harsh treatment of the queer community. Internationally, imperialism continued apace, with the Nicaraguan revolution; various terrorist attacks in Beirut, India, and Rome; the invasion of Grenada; the Iran–Iraq war; the hostage crisis; the Tiananmen Square protests; and Ronald Reagan as the sunny face of American rectitude. In more recent times, the Occupy movements called for an end to corporate greed and government lies, unemployment continues to devastate individual lives and families despite the creation of "millions of jobs," and more than ever there is no hope our government will help the people who pay heavily for its excesses. Wojnarowicz's work speaks to all these political issues and his rage echoes through the years as a call to action:

> Somewhere since childhood I have found comfort and hope in various forces of nature that were either unexplainable or uncontrollable; spontaneous self-combustion or tornadoes, floods or earthquakes and volcanoes—when the future of civilization and all its leanings could suddenly be altered or whisked from human hands by natural occurrence or "unnatural" phenomenon as flying saucers or the reviving from glacial sleep of an old, bewildered dinosaur as in black and white Japanese movies; all this gave me faith in the nature and possibilities of change.

Sexuality

On May 15, 1988, Tommy Lee Trimble and John Lloyd Griffin were harassed for being gay and later shot by Richard Lee Bednarski in Dallas, Texas. Bednarski was convicted of the two murders but the judge who issued the sentence gave Bednarski only thirty years rather than life. The judge, Jack Hampton, said that he believed these homosexuals would not have been killed if they "hadn't been cruising the streets" for men. In an article for *The New York Times,* published on January 21, 1986, Richard Meislin wrote, "Public fear over the spread of AIDS has led to increased discrimination and violence against homosexuals, even as it has created new obstacles to obtaining legal protections, according both to leaders of homosexual groups and to government officials." Wojnarowicz sees the larger picture:

> Less than a century ago the wholesale slaughter of Indians was commonplace, and they'd have been completely exterminated if not for organization and resistance; today the homosexual in America sustains the same slaughter which is socially acceptable in most areas; witness the judge in Texas that recently reduced the life sentence of a guy convicted of shooting two men to death because they were homosexual. People in various cultures take to bodies of water for purification rites; southern pond baptisms; Indians along the Ganges river; Haitians in voodoo rituals of cleansing: thus the bathing men; something also richly erotic to me. The four eyes opening or closing mirrors the four pale blue moons in something like eclipse; maybe the final motion of dying. I have no plans to go but if I do this is the partial structure of my frame of references.

Wojnarowicz adds: "It at times is unimaginable for me to understand that after all these centuries that homosexuality can still cause conflict in someone's mind and yet it's obvious that those that make policy are still intent on eradicating forms of sexual expression and or those that embody them. Step back a few

hundred miles into space; in the air above all this and it looks like ants in a clockwork maze of pre-invented structures." Didier Eribon, in *Returning to Reims,* talks about how difficult it is to break out of the pre-invented system that we have been taught to obey since childhood:

> All those people who want things to be "regular," or "meaningful," or to correspond to "stable points of reference" know they can count on the way adherence to the norm is inculcated into the deepest levels of our consciousness from our earlier years. This happens by way of our ongoing experience of the social world and by way of the discomfort — the shame — we come to feel when the part of the world in which we live fails to follow those tidily organized political and legal rules. The surrounding culture offers us those rules both as the only way life can be lived and as an ideal we must strive for. This is the case even if any such version of a normative family or familial norm in fact corresponds to nothing we ever encounter in real life.

For Wojnarowicz, the frame of reference has to change to expose the pre-invented structures, those foundations that are not organic, but synthetic and that control us through surveillance and policing.

Homeless in America

Affordable housing is as much a problem today as it was in the '80s. In "America's Affordable Housing Crisis: A Contract Unfulfilled," Lance Freeman writes, "In 1989, 17% of renters paid more than 50% of their income for rent; in 1999, 20% did. Thus, during the period of the longest economic boom in history scarcely any progress was made in the arena of affordable housing." During the summer of 2012, I decided to make a short documentary on street life in New York and New Jersey. I had just lost my job that previous winter, after a bookstore I had worked in for seventeen years closed, and was unemployed. I was about to

lose my apartment, which I eventually did, and so I decided to make a film about the homeless. But while I was shooting, I met many different kinds of street people, young and old, who were willing to talk about their experiences or otherwise had interesting and sometimes bizarre tales to tell. Making such a film, without any money or support, and facing the potential dangers of such encounters on the street, is a thankless task in America. The film was never finished but I did publish a book containing stills from the film. I now think of these images, collectively, as a document of the endurance of the human spirit. Wojnarowicz writes about an experience when he was living on the streets:

> A mayor who recently decided to charge poor people for their shelter when the shelter is a daily nightmare of rape stabbings robbery and intimidation. When I lived on the streets as a teenager, I was given two tickets for two meals at the shelter on 48th street by the fat captain of the salvation army who said: "We usually don't help people like you…" (I was rail thin and blood spurted from my mouth at every drag on a cigarette) The shelter kitchen hired a deranged drunkard as a guard to keep order in the food lines; I saw him bash out the eye of an old man who through dizziness stumbled against the door.

There is a widening rift between the everyday life of ordinary Americans and the insulated world of the wealthy. Many of the men and women living on the streets exist outside both realms. They are rendered invisible as a result of their situation. Yet they carry truths we refuse to face. And the obligation is clear: we must listen.

The Order of Things

In David Wojnarowicz's origin story, he distinguishes between the actual world and the pre-invented world, that which is false and constructed by humans, a world of consumerism, pre-fab

houses, commercialism, sexual oppression, surveillance, etc. From *Close to the Knives*:

> First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other world is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its pre-invented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world.

And this problem extends to language. In *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz,* Wojnarowicz opines:

> I hate language. I hate what words are like. I hate the idea of putting these performed gestures on the tip of my tongue or through my lips or through the inside of my mouth, forming sounds to approximate something that's like a cyclone, or something that's like a flood, or something that's like a weather system that's out of control, that's dangerous, that's alarming. I hate language in this moment because it seems like so much bullshit. It just seems like sounds that have been uttered back and forth now over centuries. And it all boils down to the same meaning within those sounds, unless you're more intense in uttering them, or you precede them or accompany them with certain forms of violence.
>
> Even in talking about all of this, I realize nobody could know what the fuck I am talking about—that it is ridiculous when it's put into language. I'm lying on a bed that's my bed, but it's not my bed. It's all these things of taste and design and ideas that have nothing to do with me, or that I want nothing to do with. And so I submit to them. I submit to the form of this bed. I submit to the feel of the cloth underneath me.

There is seemingly no way out of this fabricated existence, this invented world. And so for Wojnarowicz: "We've been sold a corrupted and false history as well as a corrupted and false future—witness the elections or nightly news." The social order is secured through erasure—through destruction, enforced amnesia, detention, and punishment. The State, enthroned in the visible, asserts its supremacy over the invisible: the immigrant, the queer body, the trans body. As Paul B. Preciado argues in *An Apartment on Uranus,* this dominance is exercised through "techniques of violence" deployed against women, children, racialized people, animals, and the planet itself. Surveillance becomes the State's second skin, policing every gesture, every appearance that fails to conform, branding the noncompliant as inferior—an othered body to be disciplined or erased. Man has destroyed the natural world and is more concerned with constructing a kind of massive Disneyland of entertainment and mindless pleasures, all of which is aimed at brainwashing us in order to help us to consume what we don't need, believe what we don't believe, and place our hope in what can never happen, as certain animals become extinct in a ravaged land. Wojnarowicz writes: "With the invention of the word nature we instantly cut ourselves off from the ground we walk on; abstracted 'nature' to the point where we feel no identification with its destruction at our hands; the hands of industry or renewal. Using animals as a form to convey information about scale or intention is to take that power away from the human and return it to the life forms that have been abstracted into the 'other.'" In *In The Shadow of Forward Motion,* for Wojnarowicz, all this involves our move away from spirituality, and our embrace of a materialist view that seeks to measure and map our way of life, in terms of economics, government, law, order, and reason:

> The desire for speed that started with the first forms of transportation and later accelerated with the invention of the wheel. The desire for sense in the arena of living; that search that has brought people outside of themselves to find location in time and space; distance and landscape; the coopt-

> ing of landscape or physical space by attempting to conquer distance and if brought to an extreme would be in the possibility of standing still and simultaneously experiencing every inch of existence by looking outward whereas this has only resulted in the accumulation of billions of bits of outside description; books, films, photographs, writings, music, etc. It's the journey inward that may solve the ultimate questions we have. Spirituality became a dirty word in this society because of human structure … as adults we are pressured to leave myth behind.

We live in a secular, materialistic world where profit and status expose us to an external world where our reality is endless hours of work and little time left to cultivate our inner world though books, art, photography, film. The abyss grows inside us, eating us alive, as we attempt to fill it through the seemingly endless purchase of commodities. But the alternative culture has its alternative spirituality: the *Yijing,* Aleister Crowley, Madame Blavatsky. This vision of a different world is a utopian one, where reading, viewing films, listening to music, and seeking out experiences that alter perception, can transform consciousness and lead to a new vision of the future.

Instead of viewing the world as unified, singular, and bounded by walls it is more imaginative and revolutionary to view it as multiple, borderless, stateless, and changeable. Because, as Wojnarowicz reminds us, the territory is not the map.

Possibilities for Human Connection

There may be no obvious way out of the pre-invented world except perhaps during certain moments when one confronts the actual world of nature, untouched by the human hand of the greedy industrialist whose sole purpose is to rape the natural world for profit and to satisfy his donors. In these special moments alone in nature, Wojnarowicz experiences a kind of transcendence. From *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz*:

> And in moments like this, with the sky the way it is, just mountains in the distance, I'm sitting on the curve of the earth and watching the light slowly dissipate. A few silhouetted cactuses and a bunch of bees trying to drink some water that's sitting in a drinking fountain. A couple of them were jerks. They fell in and drowned, but I pulled a few out that were still struggling around. A few trees, just waving slowly. It's just a real gentle moment. I'm here by myself and I don't mind. I kind of wish it could just stay like this for maybe a few years, or I just never moved out of this spot. I could just watch the light stay like this. And maybe somebody coming along and just putting their arms around me for a few minutes.

Teenagers move through the world with journals in their pockets, writing about love, longing, and the raw weather of their feelings. That idealism gets stripped away. Most go to college, study business or programming, and abandon that inner world in the pursuit of profit. That is the script. It is drilled so deeply into us that almost no one escapes it. Step outside it and the punishment is immediate: persecution, abuse, poverty, homelessness. The world turns hostile; life becomes precarious. The structure closes around you like a fist.

Wojnarowicz's work gives one hope that an alternative world might be possible, one without the polished sheen of artificial surfaces, where everything appears pre-invented and geared towards making everyone into robots obsessed with money and power, just like those greedy profiteers, politicians, and religious fundamentalists who rule the pre-invented world. Just then perhaps real human connections could be possible.

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