My Business Is Circumference
Poets on Influence and Mastery

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Poems & essays by 28 contemporary American poets

edited by **Stephen Berg**

MY BUSINESS IS CIRCUMFERENCE

Poets on Influence and Mastery

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PREFACE

When I first envisioned this book I hoped to learn what American poets had to say about the mysterious processes of influence and mastery. Here's a paragraph from the letter I sent to prospective contributors:

> The idea is that each contemporary American poet chooses 3–5 poems that have influenced his or her poetry, as well as a poem of his or her own. You would then write a short *essay* discussing the nature of the influence the poems have had on your work, and talk about the idea of mastery, what it is, and how you wrote your poem, what problems you faced—what the process was. I'm leaving the content of the essay as open as possible at this point. Please feel free to make any connections you like under the general categories of influence and mastery.

I am happy to say that twenty-eight of the finest contemporary poets in America accepted my proposal, and as you read *My Business is Circumference* you will see how each poet interpreted the invitation to muse on influence and mastery. In choosing the poems that have influenced them, in selecting their own poems, and in writing about influence and mastery, the contributors have created an intimate and helpful work. Poem by poem, essay by essay, the poets show the reader their distinctive involvement with writing and reading and how those nearly twin activities feed into one another.

This is a book for people who go to poetry because they believe it is a serious, almost miraculous activity, and who want to get as close as possible to the actual struggle of creating poetry, who want to know about a poet's relationship to language and experience. Many styles, many approaches to the craft of writing appear here. I hope that readers will feel as enriched as I do to be so happily contained by this eloquent circle of voices.

Scores of people have devoted a great deal of time and resources to bring this project to fruition. I want to thank each of the contributors, whose work and generosity have made the book all I had originally hoped it would be—and more. In addition to the contributors, several others worked hard to see the book to publication. Thanks go to Sarah Dry, Ilana Stanger, Martha K. Davis, and Elizabeth Scanlon for their involvement, and I am especially grateful to Rayna Kalas and William Schofield who oversaw the major job of editing and proofreading the selections.

Stephen Berg
Philadelphia 2001

THE POETRY DOES NOT MATTER

by STEPHEN BERG

For Jennie Q. Dietrich
(1943–2000)

Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.
. . . . . .
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

1 The first aim of poetry is to destroy the barriers of emotional distance that separate people. That can only be accomplished with a voice that includes the reader through its compassion, its acceptance, its understanding. A poem can be about anything and still include anyone. To the degree that a poem transcends the personality of the poet, it will be "about the reader."[1] Sincerity occurs when the speaker does not write in order to be perceived as one kind of person rather than another. Nothing is more destructive to community, to creativity, than the desire to be seen as a

good person and the deceptions that are mobilized to make that happen.

> For as I detest the doorways of Death, I detest that man,
> who hides one thing in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth
> another,[2]

utters Achilles.

But how is one to judge whether a poem accomplishes that sublime anonymity, intimacy, and honesty of consciousness that give the reader access to himself, that affect the reader through the language's act of love?

2 "A poet's words can pierce us. And that is of course causally connected with the use that they have in our life. And it is also connected with the way in which, conformably to this use, we let our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words."[3] Wittgenstein's statement in *Zettel,* 155., can guide our thinking about influence and mastery, two terms which apply to both writer and reader. It's not only the writer's influences and his so-called mastery that we are seeking to understand. It's the fact that poetry enters us only when we sense that it will be useful to us; and once it does, only by letting "our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words" may we discover what the poem really means to us.

3 I find it mysterious that certain lines, passages, phrases from poems have stayed with me. It isn't simply memory that makes this happen. I struggle to become more conscious, more open to others. I fail at this; my self-concern pulls me back into the protective self-deceptions that limit my ability to love, but the confusions of a self in relation to others rekindle the struggle. There are no rules for this process of destruction and resurrection, this coming to terms with who one is and who we are. So I believe that beyond the sheer beauty of the language itself, when it is forged well enough, one's need to use poetry to solve the problems rooted in simply being human makes memory embrace particular poems.

4 It is not Yeats's famous idea of speaking through a mask, it is the idea of speaking through fewer and fewer masks until truth and the reader are one. "The procedures of the great movement of art of the early twentieth

century may serve to put us in mind of the violent meanings which are explicit in the Greek ancestry of the word 'authentic.' *Authenteo*: to have full power over: also, to commit a murder. *Authentes*: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide."[4] Trilling's meditation on sincerity and authenticity leads us back to the point where word and deed somehow become a kind of enacted nakedness or piercing of the heart that binds us deeper to each other in the impossibility of ever fully comprehending our common fate. And yet there are poems that do function as permanent definitions of what we are trying to discover about ourselves so that we may enrich civilized feeling —that continue to work as a "momentary stay against confusion."[5] The compassionate intellect of Blake's startling poem addressed to a common housefly always touches me:

THE FLY
Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance,
And drink, & sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength & breath,
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live
or if I die.

The humiliation of identification Blake undergoes in this poem dissolves personal identity and establishes the reader's relationship to God's power and the reader's power over creatures less powerful than himself. So great is the poem's morality that once you have read it, you can never again forget your own "flyness," your helplessness faced with that "some blind hand" which sooner or later shall brush your wing. That permanent humbling and consoling of the reader by the argument embedded in the lullaby rhythms of the poem—such a gentle, ironclad movement; a tone both impersonal and pitying—helps him to consider his own mortality differently. Blake's abrupt elevation of the term "thought" as an acceptable cause of death stops the reader. Mustn't Blake mean God's thought? The God above us, whatever the word God may mean; and the God a man is to the fly? It is consciousness as a moral state and thoughtlessness as immoral that screw down the logic of Blake's argument with himself, the fly, and the reader. All three become one: a single organism communing through the poem's spare, tender music. How often is one willing to talk to one's brother the fly, to offer one's apology in Franciscan humility? That gesture opens the poet to the rhetorical question, "Am not I/ A fly like thee?/ Or art not thou/ A man like me?" Why "or"? Perhaps because Blake is not convinced by his own argument at this point. In what way is a fly like a man? There must be something smaller than a fly. An ant, for example. A gnat. The fly becomes conscious in the poem, nature becomes conscious in the poem; poet, insect, and nature one conscious chain. "Thought" as defined by this poem fuses personal and cosmic awareness into an ecstatic, interdependent unity. The vast figure of a "blind hand," a purely physical, omnipotent instrument, a "thoughtless hand," is set against the idea of thought as responsible power, as conscious moral decision. Some version of universal love is being suggested here, and by the time this brief grave poem ends, Blake has become the very fly he killed at the beginning of the poem, the fly he spoke to, and he is now a "happy fly." But we will probably never unravel the meaning of those last two stanzas. The poet's passionate belief in his idea of life as thought and death as want of thought, both of which make him happy, will not quite yield to analytic reason. Nevertheless, it inspires faith, faith without an object of faith, blind faith, possibly, faith based not on reason but on Blake's gift of finally becoming—beyond personal identity—the fly whose joy breaks forth into the final pair of lines where life and death to him are the same. But not only the fly: Blake be-

comes the reader, God, and therefore fully himself. So few words to transfigure our view of death as personal threat and leave us less afraid! Twenty lines, all monosyllabic words but four; such resonant two-beat lines; so lean and large, an amulet of esoteric wisdom.

5 "[W]e don't want to be masters," Frost says, talking with Robert Penn Warren. "Somebody said to be a master writer, you don't have to wait for your moods. That'd be like Browning as he got older, you get to be a virtuoso and you aren't a poet anymore. He'd lost his moods somewhere. He'd got to be a master—we don't want to be masters."[6] Frost is referring to the influence of that vague inner state, a singular emotional direction that rises out of no clearly known source and gives each poem its inevitability, necessity, and sincerity. Mood's ultimate result is to allow the reader to trust the speaker, to listen, participate, and be moved. It is the speaker's tone of voice undefended by self-consciousness—by the desire to be loved by the reader. Beyond this union of speaker and reader is the intention to help both writer and reader "to live their lives," Wallace Stevens's definition of the purpose of poetry in *The Necessary Angel*.[7] It is not so much a moral purpose as a realization of the inarticulate vulnerability of our lives, of our need to be revealed so that we might see each other more clearly. Only then can we step out of ourselves for the sake of others. Mastery is really the gift of being able to give ourselves away, to "listen wholeheartedly," in Karen Horney's terms.[8] Then our responses to others will be what they can use. Jean-Paul Sartre called it "transparency" and believed it could eradicate the social illnesses of possessiveness and hatred of differences. The truly vital poems do this, in infinitely different ways. Let me refer once more to Frost. Though I can't find the citation in my notes, Frost said something like this: "In a poem you can kill all the babies you want to and it won't make me cry. And it isn't about bombs and things; nothing like that. It's always magnanimity—the heroism of magnanimity." And isn't magnanimity, in life and in art, having the strength to put oneself at the mercy of others' experience felt so completely that it becomes our own, at least for a moment, so that the other person knows he has been heard? We must feel with others as we feel ourselves.

6 On April 22, 1802, Wordsworth composed a stunningly direct haiku-like quatrain (which he did not publish) that inadvertently breaks through

to a fresh intuition of one of his obsessions: how the passage of time can deaden intellectual perception. Its eerie voice embodies in the living speaker the fact of having been here, being dead, surrendering in the present to death as easily as a flower withers or a leaf falls:

> I have been here in the Moon-light,
> I have been here in the Day,
> I have been here in the Dark Night,
> And the stream was still roaring away.[9]

This is the speech of the dead—from a living voice—beyond past tense, even, where the stream no longer roars. It is a kind of epitaph in complete acceptance of one's own death, written by a living man. The tone is jubilant, I think. It says that the "I" lived "in" those times of day and night, was one with them, heard and followed the stream's syllables, and now is nowhere and everywhere. There is no argument to persuade. It is pure assertion, the ego in the world at peace, impartial attention, "A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)."[10] Einstein recognized our need to solve this problem gnawing at our hearts and expressed his solution in a letter: "A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and the foundation for inner security."[11]

7 Listen to these words from the chapter "The Practice," a truly humane piece of literary criticism in William Carlos Williams's *Autobiography.* Williams is describing listening to his patients' complaints: "I lost myself in the very properties of their minds: for the moment at least I actually became them, whoever they should be, so that when I detached myself from them at the end of a half-hour of intense concentration over some illness which was affecting them, it was as though I were awakening from

a sleep. For the moment I myself did not exist, nothing of myself affected me. As a consequence I came back to myself, as from any other sleep, rested. . . . We get the news and discount it, we are quite right in doing so. It is trivial. But the hunted news I get from some obscure patient's eyes is not trivial. . . . For under that language to which we have been listening all our lives a new, a more profound language, underlying all the dialectics offers itself. It is what they call poetry."[12]

8 God knows why what enters and influences us does so. As I walked with him out of his poetry workshop at Boston University, Robert Lowell said to me: "There are no rules!" That from a man who knew all the rules, and practiced them, rules learned from any poem he could devour, rules invented under the pressure of refusing to favor one technical approach above another. Years later when I was editing *Naked Poetry,* I asked each poet for an essay to accompany the poems. Lowell's remarks on the music of poetry arrived in a letter. It is one of the most instructive statements I know on this complicated topic—of how to make the music, in Stevens's words, "we need in our situation,"[13] that can help us to assess "emotions that form the substratum of our being."[14] I'll quote the letter completely:

> Dear Stephen,
>
> Oh dear, the many paths one might take, if there were time and energy! I really don't think I can stop what I am doing and knock off something worth printing about free verse.
>
> My two rules in writing free verse are that I don't ever scan a line while I am composing it, and that the words must fall into lines. In the back of my head somewhere I am conscious that rhythm is usually made up of iambics, trochees, anapests and spondees. I think I feel the presence of these four feet when I write them, but the law and opportunity is that I am completely free. Complete freedom, though, is something I've used in very few poems. Usually even in more or less free verse I set down restrictions: stanzas with the same number of lines (most often quatrains), rhymes or off-rhymes sometimes at random, sometimes with a fixed place in the stanza, lines of more or less uniform length on the page, sometimes the lines are accentual and will scan, though this is a meter that allows great license, and the accenting of a syllable is often arbitrary. The joy and

strength of unscanned verse is that it can be as natural as conversation or prose, or can follow the rhythm of the ear that knows no measure. Yet often a poem only becomes a poem and worth printing because it has struggled with fixed meters and rhymes. I can't understand how any poet, who has written both metered and unmetered poems, would be willing to settle for one and give up the other.

This is far short of what either you or I might desire, but it's the best I can do for the moment. I have never worked my intuitions into a theory. When I drop one style of writing, it's usually a surprise to me.

An afterthought—the glory of free verse is in those poems that would be thoroughly marred and would indeed be inconceivable in meter—first the translations of the Bible: Job, the Song of Solomon, the best psalms, David's Lament, great supreme poems, written when their translators merely intended prose and were forced by the structure of their originals to write poetry; then Whitman, whose *Song of Myself* is the only important long nineteenth century American poem, then Lawrence's bird and animal poems, Pound's *Cantos,* and most of William Carlos Williams. These works would have lost all their greatness and possibility in meter.

Yours as always, Cal

Here you can see a vigilant craftsman defining mastery as uncertainty and inclusiveness. He knows that poetry, in Eliot's words, is "a raid on the inarticulate"[15] and therefore demands an almost religious faith in music's power to satisfy the reader's longing to hear redemptive speech, the grace of a voice that can somehow give us a poetry to cope with the irremediables and to carry us beyond the failed limits of explanation. And there are poems that are barely poems, that are some kind of chaste, nearly speechless songs, weird woeful plaints, heartfelt, primitive, throaty laments, knotty, locked in a storyless self:

Erthe took of erthe, erthe wyth wogh:
Erthe other erthe to the erthe drough;
Erthe leyde erthe in erthen through:
Than hadde erthe of erthe erthe ynough.[16]

Let's call the music of poetry the theme beneath the conscious activity that makes sense of what we cannot understand by means of reasoned

argument. Music helps us to surrender to life and accept it. It is like nature —undeniably present without explanation, a radiance of silent imagery.

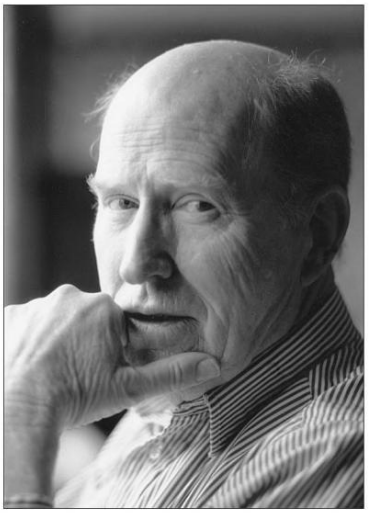
9 "*My* business is to love. I found a bird, this morning, down-down-on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody *hears*?"[17] Dickinson's bird is deep inside us waiting to be heard. Yet sometimes nothing avails us. We hear nothing, not a note. We wait for the sound of a voice that will hear us. I said *hear* us. We feel we are heard by others' voices when we hear them as our own. This is a phenomenon of identity and anonymity, a simultaneous transference of one particular self to an anonymous voice. It is difficult to define it when it occurs or even to be aware of it when it does. We have a sense that we are known, relieved of a burden of isolation. It comes through the music. The tone. It occurs at the "frontiers of consciousness . . . where words fail but meaning still exists,"[18] according to Eliot. What are we straining to hear? What are we listening for? Frost once said, "The surest way to reach the heart is through the ear."

> As I me walked in one morning,
> I hard a birde both wepe and singe.
> This was the tenor of her talkinge,
> *Timor mortis conturbat me,*[19]

sang nobody-with-a-name-we-know in 1460 in the throes of feeling doomed by inescapable, pitiless death. He was trying to pray; he was trying to hear himself in the bird, man as a bird who both weeps out of grief and sings triumphantly; he knew that if he found the music he would be saved, if only for a moment. *Timor mortis conturbat me.* Church Latin for the congregation to chant. He is with us. He *is* us. Emily asks why the bird sings since nobody hears? Because it must sing, though it knows no audience, but in fact she heard it. Her love was her listening. A mastery in humility, an influence spontaneously bestowed upon her from deep among the leaves. The prayer of her listening, the answer of the bird.

MY BUSINESS IS CIRCUMFERENCE

Poets on Influence and Mastery



A. R. AMMONS

A. R. Ammons wrote: "I was born and raised on a farm outside Whiteville, North Carolina. After the Navy, I went to Wake Forest University, graduating with a B.S. in 1949. I was married that year to Phyllis Plumbo and we had a son in 1966. I taught at Cornell University until 1998, when I retired." Ammons's books of poetry include *Ommateum with Doxology* (Dorrance & Co., 1955), *Expressions of Sea Level* (Ohio State University Press, 1963), *Corsons Inlet* (Cornell University Press, 1965), *Diversifications* (Norton, 1975), and *Lake Effect Country* (Norton, 1983). In addition to his shorter verse, Ammons authored two book-length poems, *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (Cornell University Press, 1965) and *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (Norton, 1974). His poetry has been collected in *Collected Poems* (1972), *Selected Poems* (1977), and *Selected Longer Poems* (1980), all published by Norton. A. R. Ammons died on February 25, 2001.

Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth
and go on out
    over the sea marshes and the brant in bays
and over the hills of tall hickory
and over the crater lakes and canyons
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air
past the blackset noctilucent clouds

where one wants to stop and look
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments
up farther than the loss of sight
into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
coelenterates
and praying for a nerve cell
with all the soul of my chemical reactions
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut
and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down
and if I find you I must go out deep into your
far resolutions
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
The Rhodora: On being asked, whence is the flower?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,

Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.

WALT WHITMAN
Aboard at a Ship's Helm

Aboard at a ship's helm,
A young steersman steering with care.

Through fog on a sea-coast dolefully ringing,
An ocean-bell—O a warning bell, rock'd by the waves.

O you give good notice indeed, you bell by the sea-reefs ringing,
Ringing, ringing, to warn the ship from its wreck-place.

For as on the alert O steersman, you mind the loud admonition,
The bows turn, the freighted ship tacking speeds away under her
gray sails,
The beautiful and noble ship with all her precious wealth speeds away
gayly and safe.

But O the ship, the immortal ship! O ship aboard the ship!
Ship of the body, ship of the soul, voyaging, voyaging, voyaging.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
Poem

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

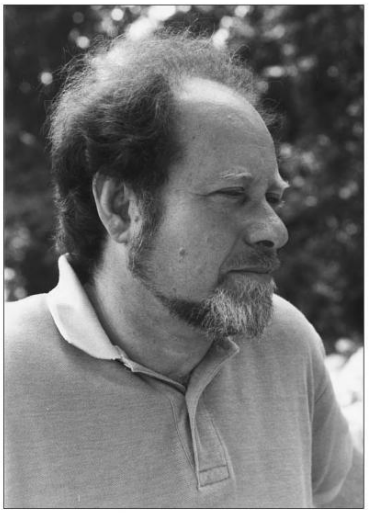
the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot

Hymns

I've been influenced by everything and everybody, especially by the only poetry I heard as a child, hymns. The mixture of song, form, and meaning became the basis of the flow for me, as well as the content I have engaged. A line such as "There's a land that is fairer than day" came much before Stevens's imagined land. And "Here I labor and toil as I look for a home, just a humble abode among men" describes my wrestling with myself and the highest challenge I have tried to meet. But those who speak of my poems most frequently mention Emerson, Whitman, Frost, Williams, and Stevens, along with occasional mention of everybody. I feel like a kiosk. Anything can stick to me. My own poems keep sounding about the same through time, but they do change, so I think the best triad of sequence would be something like Frost and Emerson, say from my *Ommateum,* something like Whitman—my *Hymn*—and, say, a Stevens stanza, like my *The Spiral Rag.* I will choose *Hymn* as the closest figure for my early work —from Emerson, *The Rhodora,* from Whitman, *Aboard at a Ship's Helm,* and from Williams, *Poem* (about the jamcloset).



L. S. ASEKOFF

L. S. Asekoff, director of the M.F.A. Poetry Program and faculty associate of The Wolfe Institute for the Humanities, was the Donald I. Fine Professor of Creative Writing at Brooklyn College for 1998–99. His two books of poetry are *Dreams of a Work* (Orchises Press, 1994) and *North Star* (Orchises Press, 1997).

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Lifted from black plumage of ashes
my words come back to me

MEXICO
nobody goes on, with a wo

nship between la
of went
the
mirrors

ally, but polishe

& I8d ever see

Strange to myself as I am these days
who damned by the light of my own match
set these paper boats upon a lake of fire.
"The mystery of mastery," I say . . .

The Mysteries of Mastery

Language is thy mistress.
& thy master? Silence.
Hôtel du Tour

Black Swan

Cast loose in the middle of his life, shipwrecked by love, he knew his long apprenticeship was over. In his crazy solitude, he sat alone waiting for the voices. Slowly, they came to him, one by one, & then all in a rush. Taking dictation, writing furiously, he could barely keep up with them—twenty-five poems in twenty-five days—until it seemed to him anything he thought or said could, *would,* be a poem, even a throwaway list, a note to the postman. Soon, exhausted, overwhelmed by the continuous presence of those clamoring voices, he cursed what had once been a blessing, prayed for silence.

Outside the window he could see against late winter sky a flock of blackbirds unscroll the wild improvisatory music, jangling silvery half- & quarter-notes of their liquid flight, shrill cries. He struck an Ohio blue-tip against stone, threw the lit match into the fireplace where the green wood hissed its smoky, resinous whisper, lascivious, sibilant, licking piles of crumpled paper that as they rose burst into flame—each letter blackly luminous on the white fire of the page.

In his diary he wrote that night: "Today I burned 'The Black Swan.'"

First Transcendental Etude

Opening *The Book of Borrowed Breath,* he reads: *"Attention is the natural prayer of the soul."* & what, he muses, is poetry if not an act of supreme attention? Then what is the difference between poetry & prayer? Not who speaks, I would say, but who listens. He puts the book aside & looks up at me. Dear boy, every dog cocks his ear for the whistle of his master. Whose

whistle do you hear? Whose dog are you? (& when life has you by the throat, who do you pray to?)

The Never-Ending Sentence

He is compiling a personal dictionary of the language according to historical principles, cataloguing each word as to the occasion & frequency of its appearance. His goal is to chart all the words he has ever encountered *in the exact sequence in which they came to him.* It begins with the source, trickles of sound, liminal phonemes, musical trills bubbling up into speech, moves on through a babble of syllables, lullabies, full-blown baby talk to, as the shallow brook deepens, first-words, strings of words, entire phrases, until moving more swiftly now, gathering into itself tributaries of the widening worlds of reading & writing, it picks up momentum & becomes a freshet, a spring stream, a broad, majestic river flowing grandly on & on past language's sleepy port towns, alluvial harbors, distant towering polyglot cities to this very moment of . . . *a way alone a last a loved* . . . for never, he says, will we reach the mouth, & the sea. He is not unaware of the perils of such an ambitious, if eccentric, adventure, each word existing not only in itself but altered as it were by the climate of its occasion, the swirling currents of usage & time, & if this were not daunting enough, the whole enterprise is further threatened by a telling objection—its virtual impossibility, i.e., that, like a full-scale map of the world, it needs to be as large as the world it maps, using language to depict *ad seriatum* an ongoing experience of language, his dictionary is doomed to be unable to contain the ever-expanding linguistic universe it continues to add to, "the never-ending sentence of our lives."

Second Transcendental Etude

"You think, after all, you must be weaving a piece of cloth,
because you are sitting at a loom, even if it is empty,
and going through the motions of weaving."

"Not one word is original to me," he laughs, "therefore, I am my own master."

White Rose

He is convinced that the liar's paradox, like Zeno's speeding arrow or a zen koan, shows us the glories of the imagination as well as the limits of logic & language. How paltry a tool is reason when blindly mapped on a mere two-, three-, four-dimensional surface. To see the world "whole" —in its *quintessence,* as the old theologians used to say—one must take into account, he tells us, its dynamic, self-revising, ever-flowing nature—its indeterminate determinacy, unbounded boundedness, cursive recursiveness. From infinitesimal to infinite, he insists, the world is less fractured than fractal. & while he agrees with Pascal & the quantum mechanics that God may play dice with the universe, he has faith that beyond the laws of probability chance is to time what fate is to eternity. The world is a manifold, unfolding at every instant, if we but see it. A many-petaled luminous white rose! The poet's paradise & our only heaven! & counter to it—what? The blank shadow of its non-existence? The black rose? No, he retorts, we must give up such easy windows, step through the binary mirror, abolish the laws of identity & contradiction! We must cultivate an imageless imagining. This is our task. The zero sum game, the wager worthy of challenging the most daring minds. He calls it "the masterless mastery of the master," or "the holding-on of letting-go."

Third Transcendental Etude

& here, he points to the page, are the lessons for the day:

"You are the task. No pupil far and wide."
"There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation."
"The animal wrests the whip from its master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash."

& this is a little song I translated to amuse myself. It is called *Viento Azul:*

There is a horse & there is a man.
There is a whip & there is a whisper.
& there is a man mounting a horse.

The horse is a blue wind.
Who can ride him?

Fourth Transcendental Etude

He says we write *from* & we write *toward*. We write out of the eclipsing shadow & we write into the haloed light that blinds us. How often, he laments, have I woken from a dream of a dream holding in my hand no white rose? O, faceless one, universal author of the ongoing poem of the world, your pale shadow blankens the blackest wall! Thus, he concludes, the son sires the father. *"Each of us creates his own precursors."*

Seer/Over-Seer

It was after our quarrel, she confesses. In my dream, I said, *My love is a paper boat set on a lake of fire,* & you said, *Damned by the light of my own match, I stared into the dark refrigerator. Choose,* you said. *All the unasked questions are answered in time.* I reached into the black box & pulled out the shining letters *I* & *M*. I could feel the subtle vibrations flowing to me—influenza, starlight, intelligence from afar. Like a current, they rippled through the pure medium I had become. Then there was a jolt, like the shock of an electric eel. It stopped me in my tracks. I felt the whip (& the whisper), the laying on of hands, the firm controlling touch. I was no longer transparent to myself, but opaque, not fluid, but solid, & restrained. Surrendering, I bowed to kiss your gleaming buckle. Yet even as my lips touched cold metal I could hear myself think, *Idolatry—the servant's revenge on the master.*

Oracle

Thirty-six years ago, he reminisces, I stood all night between cars on a crowded train from Athens to Paris sharing my cigarettes with a sallow Greek who claimed to have relatives in Astoria, Queens. When I told him I wanted to be a writer, he stared for a moment into the starless dark & said, in halting English, "Just when you think you will never write again, that is when you will begin to be a writer." What is strange is not what he said, though strange it was, but that out of all the things said to me over

the years I chose to remember it. So, following where we go, we write the story of our lives.

Fifth Transcendental Etude

& here, he confides, is what brought me to the last line—the severities & silences, the (false) etymologies of my (true) taskmaster who parsed my soul &, whether comparing a semi-colon in a sentence of Henry James to the woodcuts of Hokusai or the "aesthetic shock" of a Sufi inscription over the lintel of a prayer hall in Isfahan to "drifting water lilies longing to open," taught me how to balance a wheel & the true beauty of thought.

"Do you think that she was writing about you?

No, not at all. It would be vanity to think so. The writer she describes is a master of illusion.

And you are the master of non-illusions?

You mean to be kind, but mastery itself is the illusion. You haven't touched that machine. Does it start itself?

Yes, it's voice-activated.

You should avoid attributive nouns. Don't use voice as an adverb, it's a noun. Do you mean that if I remain mute the machine will stop? That it won't record my silence?

It will for several seconds. It has a time-lag device.

Then I am afraid that your interview will misrepresent me if it elides my silences. Aside from silences, my speech consists chiefly of quotations, what Horatio Greenough complained of: 'Extraneous and irrelevant forms invade that silence which is alone worthy of man when there is nothing to be said.' Perhaps the machine will record the ruffle of pages as I look up quotations.

I would say that voice-activated *is a compressed prepositional phrase,* by voice-activated tape recorder. *The* by *is silent.*

If you are writing a thesis on my work, I hope that you write better than you speak. Did you know that the fifteenth-century mystery plays were mastery plays, performed by masters of a guild, men whose craft was a mystery? They must have felt that their work was authorized and added something. If you are going to know my books, you need to know what I know. That is why I have agreed to this interview.

I'm sorry that you resent this.

I haven't said that I resent anything. Don't interpret me to myself: wait until you get home and listen to the tape. You seem to think that you have something to say about my writing that my writing doesn't say, and I am eager to discover what it could be. Perhaps you will use your skills as a Master of Arts in Literature to teach me what I have been trying to learn about myself by writing. I have quoted Polanyi's words to explain my writing: 'It is a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs.'"

Ticket to Continuum

Writing is a continuum, he says. Words come from everywhere & nowhere, snatches of music in the air, a shout in the street, the murmurous sea of language. Everything vibrates with tiny filaments of meaning & sound: hammer of pulse, anvil of breath, vast unheard cycles of neutron, lepton, solar wind, star, the swarming electrons of the table we write on, paper, inkwell, flowing pen. & all are borrowed like our breath, bestowed & owed, given out & taken back, again & again. We live in a world we did not make. Yet here we are at the farthest reach of time casting our brief wild spark into the abyss. What keeps us company as we go along? Beneath all breath & speaking springs that great subterranean river, wordless song, darkly flowing toward silence & the sea.

Sixth Transcendental Etude

He says drowsily, Sometimes the book is a boat, drifting, drifting in the wake of its wake, as *"A sail ! A veil awave upon the waves."* Lotused on the rug, he reads: *"In the sounding of* mantra, *one lets the eternity of soundlessness, which is the enchanted origin and being of language, silently and musically resound. In the gesture of* mudra, *one effaces the ego by erasing its writing: this act of devotion lets the luminous writing of light,* as well as *the dark writing of shadow, gracefully alight on the white-surfaced paper. In this manner, one realizes the visible emptiness of light, which is also the invisible space from whence language comes forth."* Perhaps that is why, (he touches his finger to my lips), the poet came to remind us, *"Language is Delphi."*

Seventh Transcendental Etude

The rabbis tell us, *"the white fire is the written Torah, the black fire the oral Torah."* & one of them even suggests that *"the white spaces in the scroll of the Torah consist of letters we cannot see. Only when the Messiah comes will God reveal to us the white invisible letters of the Torah."*

Hence, the poet writes, *"Then where is the truth but in the burning space between one letter and the next."*

Gate

It began alone in a room with others. Thirteen years ago. Jewish leap year, a year of thirteen moons. He thinks back to those brief luminous winter days & long starry ice-age nights of excitation & exhaustion & renewal, of joy & despair & joy again, when writing seemed like copying only, tracing shadows, listening to voices, taking dictation. He had written himself to the center of what he had to say, & found there nothing but a hollowness, a hole, & a great forgetting, a farewell that was in its way a greater welcoming, the selfless self some call the soul. In his gnomic script, he wrote: *Civilization: the conversation of ghosts. Existence: a circle whose circumference is everywhere.*

Thirteen years later, sitting in this room of perfumed paper-whites & raked ashes, reading these words rescued from the transient foxfires of time —love letters, elegies, failed & finished poems—the burning (of writing) saved by the writing (of burning)—even now, they shine back at him, illuminating the dark—signals, semaphors, shattered light—each wounding shard a tiny illusory mirrorworld—vertiginous, dazzling, dizzyingly self-reflective. *The gloss is a glass,* he says. *Aleph a gate.*

So, passing back through the shadow of ourselves, we bow to the angel of morning.

Ox-Herding Pictures

He shows me the xerox of a xerox of a xerox. (Is it faintly graying, this blank page?) "Once we valued the faded original," he says, "then the fresh copy. Now we must be true to our originless origins. Coinless coins. Echo without word." Pausing now to face the surface. "Whiteness is witness,

my friend. What you see is what you get! & because there is no difference," he smiles, "we can choose."

Eighth Transcendental Etude

"Empty-handed I go, and behold the spade is in my hands;
I walk on foot, and yet on the back of an ox I am riding;
When I pass over the bridge,
Lo, the water floweth not, but the bridge doth flow."

In the Scriptorium

He sits alone in a room with others faithfully copying what lies before him. In perfect stillness, he can hear the bell ringing before it has rung, in his mind's eye follow the migratory network of flocks of returning swallows before they take flight. Above him the clerestory ceiling weakly reflects cloudy undulations of a late winter sun. Shadow fish swim through a shadow net. Just this morning, he woke to the words, *Stars pale to meaning,* & one by one they vanished—snowflakes—melting like memories in a lake of light. Turning his gaze from faded original to the bright surface of this page glistening with lines of ink, he wonders if the net *is* its minute reticulations or the empty spaces between them. Then he picks up his pen & begins to write: *He sits alone in a room with others . . .*

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Italicized passages from *The Book of Borrowed Breath:*

First Transcendental Etude:	Malebranche
Second Transcendental Etude:	Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*
Third Transcendental Etude:	Kafka, "Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way"
Fourth Transcendental Etude:	slight paraphrase of Borges, "Kafka and his Precursors"
Fifth Transcendental Etude:	William S. Wilson, "Metier," in *Why I Don't Write Like Franz Kafka* (Ecco Press, 1977)
Sixth Transcendental Etude:	James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

David Michael Levin, "The phenomenon and noumenon of language: the twin paths of *mantra* (perfect speaking) and *mudra* (perfect writing)," "In the Wake of the *Wake*," (*Triquarterly* 38, Winter, 1977)
Novalis

Seventh Transcendental Etude: paraphrase of Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Schocken Books, 1969)
Edmond Jabes, *From the Book to the Book: An Edmond Jabes Reader* (Wesleyan University Press, 1991)

Eighth Transcendental Etude: Lao-Tzu, *The Way*

STEPHANIE BROWN

Stephanie Brown was born in Pasadena, California, in 1961 and grew up in Newport Beach. She attended Boston University and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She holds a Master of Library Science from the University of California at Berkeley. Brown's first book of poetry was *Allegory of the Supermarket* (University of Georgia Press, 1998). Her work was included in the 1993, 1995, and 1997 editions of *Best American Poetry* and has also been anthologized in *The Body Electric* (W. W. Norton, 2000) and *American Poetry: Next Generation* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2000). Brown is married and has two sons. She lives in San Clemente.

No Longer a Girl

The city was a gray city.
I was dreaming of nothing then.
I had no hopes of love anymore.
My back was breaking.
My heart was cracked.
Though it wasn't broken by another person.
I liked to shout, but there was no one to listen.
I was no longer a girl: no one looked and they once did.
It was dark but there were no storms to create verdant forests.

Drizzle, steady, on the train which ran down the freeway, then went
underground.
I remember those guys nodding out, that kid playing with himself
All the way home from the airport. In the cute house I rented
There was this stain on the planked floor which trailed
directly from the bathroom to the around-the-corner bedroom door.
Someone had walked that path, dripping wet, for years.
I wasn't doing it, I swear.
It's hard to believe, but there was a crematorium on the corner.
Really. And there was a graveyard where my street dead-ended.
I found the graves of the Civil War soldiers, marked by cannons.
There were ponds, bent trees, and leaves floating in the waters.
And if you walked to the top of the hill
You could see Merritt Lake downtown.
You could see the Pacific beyond.
You could see light shimmer on the water but everything
Inside of me held still.
Not afraid of the feel of the dead,
Not afraid of the living sitting in cafés or walking the dog:
On Sundays I'd walk down to the street near my house
Where there were stores and things to do, even a movie theater,
Because I thought: "I'll take a walk and that will be fun"
But everything was sad, even the joy I once felt opening the big
Sunday newspaper was gone.
After a while I left that city, when I was done.

NATHANAEL WEST
Excerpt from ***The Day of the Locust***

Around quitting time, Tod Hackett heard a great din on the road outside his office. The groan of leather mingled with the jangle of iron and over all beat the tattoo of a thousand hooves. He hurried to the window.

An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat. The dolmans of the hussars, the heavy shakos of the guards, Hanoverian light horse, with their flat leather caps and flowing red plumes, were all jumbled together in bobbing disorder. Behind the cavalry came the infantry, a wild sea of waving sabertaches, sloped muskets, crossed shoulder belts and

swinging cartridge boxes. Tod recognized the scarlet infantry of England with their white shoulder pads, the black infantry of the Duke of Brunswick, the French grenadiers with their enormous white gaiters, the Scotch with bare knees under plaid skirts.

While he watched, a little fat man, wearing a cork sun-helmet, polo shirt and knickers, darted around the corner of the building in pursuit of the army.

"Stage Nine—you bastards—Stage Nine!" he screamed through a small megaphone.

The cavalry put spur to their horses and the infantry broke into a dogtrot. The little man in the cork hat ran after them, shaking his fist and cursing.

Tod watched until they had disappeared behind half a Mississippi steamboat, then put away his pencils and drawing board, and left the office. On the sidewalk outside the studio he stood for a moment trying to decide whether to walk home or take a streetcar. He had been in Hollywood less than three months and still found it a very exciting place, but he was lazy and didn't like to walk. He decided to take the streetcar as far as Vine Street and walk the rest of the way.

. . . When the Hollywood job had come along, he had grabbed it despite the arguments of his friends who were certain that he was selling out and would never paint again.

He reached the end of Vine Street and began the climb into Pinyon Canyon. Night had started to fall.

The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a Neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, humpbacked hills and they were almost beautiful.

But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.

When he noticed that they were all of plaster, lath and paper, he was charitable and blamed their shape on the materials used. Steel, stone and brick curb a builder's fancy a little, forcing him to distribute his stresses and weights and to keep his corners plumb, but plaster and paper know no law, not even that of gravity.

On the corner of La Huerta Road was a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the *Arabian Nights.* Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how

tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous.

JAMES M. CAIN
Excerpt from ***The Postman Always Rings Twice***

We didn't say anything. She knew what to do. She climbed back, and I climbed front. I looked at the wrench under the dash light. It had a few drops of blood on it. I uncorked a bottle of wine, and poured it on there till the blood was gone. I poured so the wine went over him. Then I wiped the wrench on a dry part of his clothes, and passed it back to her. She put it under the seat. I poured more wine over where I had wiped the wrench, cracked the bottle against the door, and laid it on top of him. Then I started the car. The wine bottle gave a gurgle, where a little of it was running out the crack.

I went a little way, and then shifted up to second. I couldn't tip it down that 500-foot drop, where we were. We had to get down to it afterward, and besides, if it plunged that far, how would we be alive? I drove slow, in second, up to a place where the ravine came to a point, and it was only a 50-foot drop. When I got there, I drove over the edge, put my foot on the brake, and fed with the hand throttle. As soon as the right front wheel went off, I stepped hard on the brake. It stalled. That was how I wanted it. The car had to be in gear, with the ignition on, but that dead motor would hold it for the rest of what we had to do.

We got out. We stepped on the road, not the shoulder, so there wouldn't be footprints. She handed me a rock, and a piece of 2 x 4 I had back there. I put the rock under the rear axle. It fitted, because I had picked one that would fit. I slipped the 2 x 4 over the rock and under the axle. I heaved down on it. The car tipped, but it hung there. I heaved again. It tipped a little more. I began to sweat. Here we were, with a dead man in the car, and suppose we couldn't tip it over?

I heaved again, but this time she was beside me. We both heaved. We heaved again. And then all of a sudden, there we were, sprawled down on the road, and the car was rolling over and over, down the gully, and banging so loud you could hear it a mile.

It stopped. The lights were still on, but it wasn't on fire. . . .

I ran back, picked her up, and slid down the ravine with her. . . .

I set her down. The car was hanging there, on two wheels, about halfway down the ravine. He was still in there, but now he was down on the floor. The wine bottle was wedged between him and the seat, and while we were looking it gave a gurgle. . . .

I began to fool with her blouse, to bust the buttons, so she would looked banged up. She was looking at me, and her eyes didn't look blue, they looked black. I could feel her breath coming fast. Then it stopped, and she leaned real close to me.

"Rip me! Rip me!"

I ripped her. I shoved my hand in her blouse and jerked. She was wide open, from her throat to her belly.

My Southern California: West, Cain

As a child, I didn't really like to read all that much, but I liked books (I even made a card catalogue of all my books in junior high). I have an early memory of sitting in my room with Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses,* reciting *My Shadow* again and again. I loved the simple rhymes. They were easy to memorize. I could hold them in my mind and remember them if I wanted to, or I could turn to the book and enjoy both the words and Tasha Tudor's illustrations. In third grade, I read, memorized, and mused dramatically over *The Eagle* by Tennyson because I had read it in my English textbook. I wrote out the stanzas again and again because I loved how they looked. That one short poem lasted me a whole year. My mother had an old edition of Tennyson which I looked at, turned the pages of, and basically mooned over. I loved the idea: poet, poems, and big leather-bound books.

I found books of poetry at the mall bookstore, and I took special pleasure from my purchase of E. E. Cummings and Gary Snyder. On one trip to the mall (high on amphetamines) I went to the bookstore while my sister shopped. There was something new: *The American Poetry Anthology* edited by Daniel Halpern. That anthology became my companion during my junior and senior years in high school. I read and reread every poem in that book. I read them out loud in my room, wrote them out on lined notebook paper. I was particularly drawn to *Herbert White* by Frank Bidart and *Legs* by Kathleen Fraser. Those poems felt young and contemporary. They felt like something I wanted to do. Reading widely, even compulsively, as I have done in the twenty years since then, I've gone through serious one-sided love affairs with poets such as Yeats, Frost, Bishop, Lowell, and Merrill, to name a few, and there were many others on whom I had crushes. I was a shameless imitator of Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara for a while; I love their work.

Perversely, perhaps, I don't want to write an essay about those influences. Instead, I want to explore the influence of two novelists, Nathanael West and James M. Cain. Their depiction of Southern California and their use of language shaped my poetry and influenced my work for many years.

I

I remember as a child seeing the New Directions single-volume paperback edition of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* in my sister's box of books that she brought home from her first year at Berkeley. The black-and-white photo of the faces on the cover fascinated me, like the ads for baby dolls "100 for $1.00!" on the back cover of comic books: creepy, but I also wanted them. I used to open the box just to look at the cover. In my senior year of high school, I took the book out of the box that had sat there for ten years and read it during a week-long trip to the Colorado River with my boyfriend and friends. I read during the day while sitting on a beach chair at the river's edge, drinking a beer. I was not sure I even understood what was going on. Still, I was drawn to both novels and especially to *The Day of the Locust* because of its funny, gargoyle-ish, and thoroughly believable depictions of Californians. The people who "had come to California to die,"[1] who had found themselves restless in Los Angeles and environs—I recognized them; I knew their descendants. Fools, idiots, whores, entertainers, cowboys, schemers, con artists, artists—they populated the world I knew, not the "California Dream" version of Southern California. West's characters, even as early as the 1930s, had been betrayed by the dream.

> All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough. Finally that day came. They could draw a weekly income of ten or fifteen dollars. Where else would they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?
>
> Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for plea-

> sure. . . . They watch the waves come in at Venice. There wasn't any ocean where most of them came from, but after you've seen one wave, you've seen them all. The same is true of the airplanes at Glendale. If only a plane would crash once in a while so that they could watch the passengers being consumed in a 'holocaust of flame,' as the newspapers put it. But the planes never crash.[2]

The California writers who came after West, such as Joan Didion and Bret Easton Ellis, depicted that same restless boredom. And I knew what it felt like.

California was rarely revealed to us in the literature we read in high school. We might read Steinbeck or something like Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," but nothing about the world we knew. It was as if we were colonists in a remote part of the world, reading about the fatherland. West knew that California was not a thing like New England, New York, or the South, the places where, it seemed, all American stories were grown. He rightly saw that in order to capture the off-kilter world of Southern California, one needed to turn for models to artists of satire and the grotesque rather than to those of Yankee realism. His character Tod, an artist and set designer who comes from Yale to Hollywood to work for the movies, envisions throughout the novel a painting he calls "The Burning of Los Angeles," an apocalyptic vision of fire, destruction, and terror. Tod knew that

> [T]he fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court. Scattered among these masqueraders were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die.
>
> He was determined to learn much more. They were the people he felt he must paint. He would never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman. From the moment he had seen them, he

> had known that, despite his race, training and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier.[3]

I, too, have always been drawn to artists of satire and caricature: Goya, Daumier, Hogarth, Grosz. Serious humor. West was the first writer I'd found, at seventeen, who tried to do that with words. I was drawn to the 1930s as well. I loved everything about them: the American and European painters, the architecture, the clothes, Jean Harlow and the black-and-white movies, the hard-drinking newspapermen in suits and hats, the *feel* of it. Perhaps it was from listening to stories of my mother and father growing up in Los Angeles in the 1930s and from the sepia-toned photos from that era of my grandparents at Capistrano Beach.

When I was growing up, it seemed that everyone showed symptoms of pathological grandiosity. The people I knew expected to be rock stars and models. Our world didn't overlap much with Hollywood, but the people I knew bragged about selling cocaine to movie stars. Even those who were part of the soil of California reinvented themselves through self-improvement regimes, New Age religion, and restricted diets. I knew raw-food vegans and Breatharians; followers of est, Lifespring, Transcendental Meditation; students of Zen, Alistair Crowley, Sai Baba, Paramahansa Yogananda, and Kathryn Kuhlman; Fundamentalist-Christian commune-dwellers, Hare Krishnas, and pagans; tax resisters and survivalists. I recognized the gatherings that Tod attends in search of faces to draw:

> He visited the "Church of Christ, Physical" where holiness was attained through the constant use of chestweights and spring grips; the "Church Invisible" where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming" where a woman in male clothing preached the "Crusade Against Salt"; and the "Temple Moderne" under whose glass and chromium rood "Brain-Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs" was taught.
>
> As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint them with respect, appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization.[4]

I recognized as well the grandiosity displayed by the character Faye Greener in her conversation with Homer Simpson. She reminded me of many people I had met along the way, of listening to someone's emphatic voice high on cocaine:

> "My father isn't really a peddler," she said, abruptly. "He's an actor. I'm an actress. My mother was also an actress, a dancer. The theatre is in our blood."
>
> "I haven't seen many shows. I . . ."
>
> He broke off because he saw that she wasn't interested.
>
> "I'm going to be a star some day," she announced as though daring him to contradict her.
>
> "I'm sure you . . ."
>
> "It's my life. It's the only thing in the whole world that I want."
>
> "It's good to know what you want. I used to be a bookkeeper in a hotel, but . . ."
>
> "If I'm not, I'll commit suicide."
>
> She stood up and put her hands to her hair, opened her eyes wide and frowned.[5]

That scene still makes me laugh. I love the bleak, nasty, and on-target comedy of Nathanael West. His Los Angeles—with its silly-crass mixture of architectural periods and styles, its cinematic blending of past, present, and future, its mingling of high and low—was the world I lived in, too. I knew people—like the movie producer Claude Estee in the book—who were rich, thought themselves witty, and collected rare cars, art, and yachts. I knew people who drove cast-off Cadillacs and lived in sheds and garages, like the cockfighters who live at Homer Simpson's house. I knew the appeal of the lurid, as a cockfight appeals to Tod and Claude; I knew the ease with which Faye Greener flirts and finds herself drunk and in bed with someone. Among my acquaintances were a mother and daughter who had had sex with the single guys who lived across the street from them, one pair in one room, one in the other. I knew boys who grew up playing golf with their doctor fathers but lived, after their parents' divorce, in rental apartments with mothers who struggled to survive and finally gave up, releasing their sons into the wild.

II

> Cain writes a scene in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* where Frank rips Cora's blouse and says, as if she'd been in a car wreck, "You got that climbing out. You caught it in the door handle." Then he punches her in the eye and says, "And this you don't know how you got." I thought if I could write a line like that I could be happy for the rest of my life, at least for the rest of the day.
>
> —Stephen King, in a *New Yorker* Profile[6]

I remember lying on the couch reading the book I'd picked out at the bookstore, attracted by its cover and its title, which I recognized as a movie. I was twenty. Outside the sliding glass doors, boats slipped and glided through the calm bay water. It was a beautiful spring day. My boyfriend had gone out on our ski boat with two of our friends. This was my parents' boat. Where were they? I don't remember, but I remember being alone in the house while I read this book cover to cover without stopping. "No one has ever put down one of James M. Cain's books"—it said something like this on the back cover of *The Postman Always Rings Twice.*

It was considered strange, among my friends, to want to spend a day inside reading, especially a beautiful day. We liked to drink, go out in the ocean in fast boats, go to concerts and punk rock clubs and parties and brunch, and drink and cheat on our boyfriends and girlfriends. My boyfriend and his friends were part of the outer fringe of surfer culture, not of peace-loving green types, but of violent, drunken, petty criminal types. I was prone to violence myself. I liked the excitement and the wild emotions. I would goad the guys into fistfights by playing one off the other. I remember throwing a clog that barely missed my boyfriend's head; a couple of times, he bashed my head into a sidewalk during fights I started. Once, when we were drunk and driving in a hard rain, I slapped him so hard I cut his eye with the diamond in a ring that I was wearing, and he pulled on the emergency brake and ran from the car.

On the flip side of the drinking, the fighting, the sex, and the adrenaline were the afternoons spent watching TV while rolling joints and sitting in a vague haze and the three- or four-a.m. mornings watching old TV shows while coming down from cocaine, my jaw going back and forth, my head nodding as I listened to someone go on and on about his future

plans and starry ambitions. The guys surfed and did their thing, while the girls evolved from companion to caretaker, though sometimes the situation was reversed, depending on who had the bigger drug problem. Predictably, couples lived together for a while, changed partners, moved on and moved in with the next one. I suspected that marrying one of these guys might turn me into a harridan supporting a perpetually childish ne'er-do-well. I was watching myself turn into a "shrew" and a "bitch" where once I had been "fun," but I still wanted to marry my boyfriend. Some couples, of course, were different: the young businessmen who owned the surf store, and their wives, seemed successful and able to live both within and without the low surf culture. They seemed to possess a beatific, blissful sense of the world; they were cool; I wanted to have a life like that: *cool.*

What was the appeal of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*? Like West's novels, Cain's took place in the 1930s; they were set in L.A.—characters lived in Pasadena, where I had been born; they vacationed at Lake Arrowhead, where my family did; they drove to Malibu and Laguna, to downtown and to Glendale. It was like the sepia-toned photos of my grandparents come to life. As in *The Day of the Locust,* the characters lived in the grip of obsessions, were self-destructive even when they had luck on their side. Like me—I was like that. The story of my great-aunt who died from alcoholism, her little bungalow filled with gin bottles—that could be me. The high school friend of a friend in a dive bar trying to pick me up by bragging about his time in San Quentin, where he had been sent for manslaughter—I could be his victim. I was about to cross a threshold. I longed to try heroin, but I saw a friend go to jail for it, steal from friends and parents, disappear, and something in me held back just a little bit. I actually felt terror while reading the book; I could understand being a loser, being consigned to doom. I knew how it appealed to me. But more than anything else, I liked how Cain wrote: I liked the short, clipped phrases. I liked his sympathy for the characters. I was moved by his novels. I wanted to tell a story the way Cain did. I wanted to grasp my reader and compel him to keep reading.

In *Postman,* Cain also described a raw sexuality that I hadn't found written about anywhere else. It showed how our fantasies often fuse sex and violence. When Frank first sees Cora, he thinks:

> Then I saw her. She had been out back, in the kitchen, but she came in to gather up my dishes. Except for the shape, she really wasn't any raving

> beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her.[7]

When he finally kisses her:

> I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth up against hers. . . . "Bite me! Bite me!"
>
> I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs.[8]

Today when I read that, it seems kind of silly. But when I first began to write poetry and short stories with serious intent, I wrote a lot about sex. I published some erotic poems in *Yellow Silk*. The appeal of all that has worn off. I haven't been able to write an erotic poem in years. But it was probably the first subject I explored in any depth. When I wrote about sex, I wrote about sex in a deadpan, violent, and sometimes smirking hard-boiled style. Cain's books struck an erotic note that I understood, as did West's evocation of Faye Greener in *The Day of the Locust,* a destructive seductress who incites men to violence.

III

While writing the poem *No Longer a Girl,* I was consciously trying to imitate both Cain and West. I wanted to echo the cadence of Cain's hard-boiled writing as I began: "The city was a gray city./ I was dreaming of nothing then./ I had no hopes of love anymore./ My back was breaking./ My heart was cracked." I wanted to introduce a tough, or at least numb, persona, like the narrators of crime novels with their "here's what I see; no comment" descriptive style: "I remember those guys nodding out, that kid playing with himself/ All the way home from the airport." And there was the strange, sad (and also bizarre) fact that I lived near both a crematorium and a graveyard—it's a landscape I think West would have appreciated. My main homage to West, though, is the insertion of comedy at odd moments: "Someone had walked that path, dripping wet, for years./ *I wasn't doing it, I swear.*" I was hoping to make the reader feel unsettled, as West does by his mixture of dark humor and detached visual accuracy.

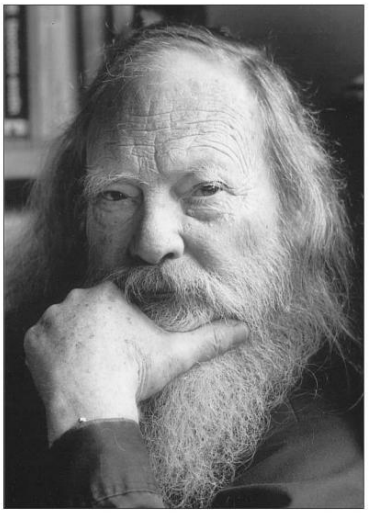
In *Miss Lonelyhearts* he describes a cuckolded, grotesque man in this way: "As he hobbled along, he made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect."[9] When I first read that line, I could not help laughing because it is so mean and funny, yet I also felt the pathos of his hopeless existence. I admire the way West does this; by being detached in his observations, by using humor, he avoids bathos and sentimentality.

I chose *No Longer a Girl* not only because I can so easily trace the influence of these two writers but also because, while writing it, I experienced for one of the first times a sense of mastery. I wrote this poem as I always did: I let anything come out, got it down, and revised within the bounds of what was on the page. I was not very good at seeing out of the frame I'd composed for myself. I hadn't really learned to be subtle, to layer a poem with meanings, to bring in paradox or ambiguity. Those techniques were something I strove for, but if I managed to achieve them, it was mostly by accident. I wrote this poem during one of those periods of great creative activity, when the poems come every day and you almost can't keep up with them. I would come home every evening after work and write and revise. I did not have a feeling of writer's block or frustration, and I did not hurry my revisions. After I wrote the first draft of this poem, I felt something essential was missing. Instead of working on the mood of the person in the poem, I saw that it needed more concrete description of the landscape. So I started to think about the actual neighborhood where I had lived, the neighborhood I was trying to describe. A crematorium was at one end of my street and the graveyard entrance was at the other end. The streets that fanned out from the graveyard entrance were home to florists, headstone makers, mortuaries. In the first draft I had not written anything about the graveyard/mortuary/crematorium area. It was like a blow to the head: how could I have overlooked that!?

I saw that I had been living in a literal landscape of death. Here was a rich—indeed, *obvious*—metaphor that I could use. But because it had been a real experience, I hoped that my descriptions of the actual place would transcend the metaphor's obvious quality. Then I made an intuitive leap: I had, for some reason, chosen to live in a funereal setting. I thought of the myth of Persephone, abducted by Hades to the underworld (death) but eventually able to leave for six months of each year. I decided that I would write the poem as if I were a contemporary Persephone describing her life in, and her return from, Hades' kingdom.

I revised with that in mind and shaped the poem to tell that story. I consciously added the Persephone myth into the poem: in lines like "Drizzle, steady, on the train which ran down the freeway, then went underground"; in the detail of the planked wood floor that tries to evoke the idea of "walking the plank"; in the descriptions of being "no longer a girl," neither seen nor heard, but living in a gray city among other spirits, like Civil War soldiers or the people on the subway. I also tried to bury the myth within the story and not call attention to it. That took a new kind of confidence to keep from laying all my cards on the table, to be subtle. Emboldened by my confidence, I added some unconventional line breaks which I felt helped to propel the emotion in the poem: "You could see light shimmer on the water but everything/ Inside of me held still" and "But everything was sad, even the joy I once felt opening the big/ Sunday newspaper was gone" instead of breaking after "water" in the first instance and "felt" in the second. To be able to revise in such an intentional way was a breakthrough for me.

I still read *No Longer a Girl* with pleasure. It is a favorite of mine. I'm happy with the way it turned out, and I happily remember the satisfaction I had while writing it. I remember very well the time in which I wrote it because it was a period of change for me. Around the time I finished this poem I happened to read again the quotation from 1 Corinthians: "When I was a child, I spake as a child. . . . but when I became a man, I put away childish things."[10] That phrase became my motto for a while, something I turned over in my mind again and again. I myself was "no longer a girl." When I looked carefully at the world around me I saw that I had moved on from these two artists who had influenced my youth, and the poem was like a fond farewell.



HAYDEN CARRUTH

Hayden Carruth was born in 1921 and for many years lived in northern Vermont. He lives now in upstate New York and has retired from teaching in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at Syracuse University. He has published 41 books, chiefly poetry, but also including a novel, four books of criticism, and two anthologies. His most recent books are *Reluctantly* (Copper Canyon Press, 1998) and *Beside the Shadblow Tree* (Copper Canyon Press, 1999). He has been editor of *Poetry;* poetry editor of *Harper's;* and, for more than 25 years, an advisory editor of the *Hudson Review.* He has received fellowships from the Bollingen Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Arts Foundation, and others. He has been presented with the Lenore Marshall Award, the Vermont Governor's Medal, the Sarah Josepha Hale Award, the Brandeis University Award, the Carl Sandberg Award, the Whiting Award, the Ruth Lilly Prize, the National Book Critics' Circle Award for poetry, and many others. In 1988, he was appointed a Senior Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
Excerpt from ***Cymbeline***

Song

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,

Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the great;
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke.
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak.
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash—
Nor th'all-dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finish'd joy and moan.
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee and come to dust.

No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!
Quiet consummation have;
And renowned be thy grave!

BEN JONSON
Epitaph on Elizabeth, L. H.

Would'st thou heare, what man can say
In a little? Reader, stay.
Under-neath this stone doth lye
As much beautie, as could dye:
Which in life did harbour give
To more vertue, then doth live.
If, at all, shee had a fault,
Leave it buryed in this vault.
One name was Elizabeth,
Th'other let it sleepe with death:
Fitter, where it dyed, to tell,
Then that it liv'd at all. Farewell.

ALEXANDER POPE
Excerpt from ***Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot***

Shut, shut the door, good John! fatigu'd I said,
Tye up the knocker, say I'm sick, I'm dead.
The Dog-star rages! nay 'tis past a doubt,
All Bedlam, or Parnassus, is let out:
Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,
They rave, recite, and madden round the land.

What walls can guard me, or what shades can hide?
They pierce my thickets, thro' my Grot they glide,
By land, by water, they renew the charge,
They stop the chariot, and they board the barge.
No place is sacred, not the Church is free,
Ev'n Sunday shines no Sabbath-day to me:
Then from the Mint walks forth the Man of rhyme,
Happy! to catch me, just at Dinner-time.

Is there a Parson, much be-mus'd in beer,
A maudlin Poetess, a rhyming Peer,
A Clerk, foredoom'd his father's soul to cross,
Who pens a Stanza, when he should *engross*?
Is there, who, lock'd from ink and paper, scrawls
With desp'rate charcoal round his darken'd walls?
All fly to Twit'nam, and in humble strain
Apply to me, to keep them mad or vain.
Arthur, whose giddy son neglects the Laws,
Imputes to me and my damn'd works the cause:
Poor Cornus sees his frantic wife elope,
And curses Wit, and Poetry, and Pope.

EMILY DICKINSON
422

More Life—went out—when He went
Than Ordinary Breath—
Lit with a finer Phosphor—
Requiring in the Quench—

A Power of Renowned Cold,
The Climate of the Grave

A Temperature just adequate
So Anthracite, to live—

For some—an Ampler Zero—
A Frost more needle keen
Is necessary, to reduce
The Ethiop within.

Others—extinguish easier—
A Gnat's minutest Fan
Sufficient to obliterate
A Tract of Citizen—

Whose Peat lift—amply vivid—
Ignores the solemn News
That Popocatapel exists—
Or Etna's Scarlets, Choose—

ROBERT FROST
Brown's Descent, or The Willy-Nilly Slide

Brown lived at such a lofty farm
    That everyone for miles could see
His lantern when he did his chores
    In winter after half-past three.

And many must have seen him make
    His wild descent from there one night,
'Cross lots, 'cross walls, 'cross everything,
    Describing rings of lantern light.

Between the house and barn the gale
    Got him by something he had on
And blew him out on the icy crust
    That cased the world, and he was gone!

Walls were all buried, trees were few:
    He saw no stay unless he stove
A hole in somewhere with his heel.
    But though repeatedly he strove

And stamped and said things to himself,
    And sometimes something seemed to yield,

He gained no foothold, but pursued
His journey down from field to field.

Sometimes he came with arms outspread
Like wings, revolving in the scene
Upon his longer axis, and
With no small dignity of mien.

Faster or slower as he chanced,
Sitting or standing as he chose,
According as he feared to risk
His neck, or thought to spare his clothes,

He never let the lantern drop.
And some exclaimed who saw afar
The figures he described with it,
'I wonder what those signals are

'Brown makes at such an hour of night!
He's celebrating something strange.
I wonder if he's sold his farm,
Or been made Master of the Grange.'

He reeled, he lurched, he bobbed, he checked;
He fell and made the lantern rattle
(But saved the light from going out.)
So halfway down he fought the battle,

Incredulous of his own bad luck.
And then becoming reconciled
To everything, he gave it up
And came down like a coasting child.

'Well—I—be—' that was all he said,
As standing in the river road,
He looked back up the slippery slope
(Two miles it was) to his abode.

Sometimes as an authority
On motor-cars, I'm asked if I
Should say our stock was petered out,
And this is my sincere reply:

Yankees are what they always were.
Don't think Brown ever gave up hope

Of getting home again because
    He couldn't climb that slippery slope;

Or even thought of standing there
    Until the January thaw
Should take the polish off the crust.
    He bowed with grace to natural law,

And then went round it on his feet,
    After the manner of our stock;
Not much concerned for those to whom,
    At that particular time o'clock,

It must have looked as if the course
    He steered was really straight away
From that which he was headed for—
    Not much concerned for them, I say;

No more so than became a man—
    And politician at odd seasons.
I've kept Brown standing in the cold
    While I invested him with reasons;

But now he snapped his eyes three times;
    Then shook his lantern, saying, 'Ile's
'Bout out!' and took the long way home
    By road, a matter of several miles.

Influences

Influences. I suppose it's okay to be interested in them. Lots of people are. But it's always seemed rather weird and futile to me. Napoleon was influenced by Plutarch, Tamerlane, and Savonarola. So what? He'd have debauched Europe just the same if he'd never heard of any of them.

In my writing, I've been influenced by at least ten thousand poems written by at least one thousand poets. That's a fact—fat with factitude. My estimate is *very* conservative. After all, I began reading in 1924, and before then poems were recited to me. Now it's 2000.

Everyone is influenced, even if minimally, by everything read, everything heard, seen, encountered in any way, no? That's what the psychoneurotechnologists say. A poem by a third-grader from Abilene can enlarge

one's sensibilities and set them ticking. It happens more often than the Big-Ass Poets are generally willing to admit.

I was asked to choose, for this assignment, five poems that have influenced me. I've done it, but I could just as well have chosen a hundred other sets of five.

Consider the opening couplet of Ben Jonson's lovely little epitaph:

Would'st thou heare, what man can say
In a little? Reader, stay.

This is a prosodic, musical wonder—yet it is simple enough. The first line consists of seven monosyllables of equal resonance. The reasonably experienced reader will recognize cataleptic dactylic tetrameter right away and will read the line with variation of pitch but practically no variation of stress or volume. It's a very strong beginning for a lyric poem. But then immediately comes the second line, with its run-over first phrase: "In a little." The two syllables—"a" and "tle"—are so low in stress that they are hardly more than murmurs, and "In" is not much stronger. The hard "lit," the only real stress, is still a low one. This combined with the rhyme of "a" and "tle," plus the nice assonance of the short "i"s and the mellifluent softness of the "n" and "l"—such a contrast to the strong first line—makes, to my ear, a triumph of musical verbalism. There follows a complete and abrupt stop, almost a standstill, before the language resumes with the very brief sentence, "Reader, stay."

I cannot say these beautiful lines aloud with anything like the delicacy of rhythm, tone, and texture I hear in my head. I doubt that any reader, even the most professional elocutionist, can do it. I could play these lines on my clarinet, and Bill Basie could have played them on his piano—he often did things with just such intrepid restraint. But the fact that I cannot enunciate the full loveliness of this poem with my actual voice does not diminish its importance for me. This is what *writing* is, so much more than speaking. And printing takes it one step further. Only a few years after I began to read, I also began to set type. The printed page is for me a treasure that can never be replaced by so-called video imagery.

As for the enigma in Jonson's epitaph, often I've wondered what part it plays in the poem's effectiveness. Some part, I'm sure. Who was Eliza-

beth? More to the point, how old was she? What was her fault? Why was the place of her death more defaming than the fact of her death? What did Jonson mean when he implied—no, stated—that the death of her name was more important than the death of her person? As far as I know, the scholars have discovered the answers to none of these questions, and we are left to our own delicious surmises.

Little is such a nice word, isn't it?—what we call "awfully nice" in our strange way of speaking. Is it beautiful? No. Unusually significant? No. Mellifluous, grand, noble? None of these things. It's just awfully nice. It makes me think of the old lullaby I love so much, which begins:

Lollai lollai litil child
Whi wepistow so sore?

Somewhere in Britain's rainy past was a man, or, more likely, a woman, who felt about language exactly as I do. Does this let me feel less lonely? No, but at least we are lonely together.

Once when I had a little boy I recited rhymes for him, as any parent does.

Higgeldy piggeldy my black hen,
She lays eggs for gentlemen.
Gentlemen come every day
To see what my black hen doth lay.

Then one night he said to me, "Papa, what does hendothlay mean?" It's a hell of a good question. Come to think of it, what *does* hendothlay mean? It's an awfully nice word. It has just the quality of smooth toughness I like best. But is it a word?

What is a word? I am thinking and writing in words at this moment and within the taut unstable limits of my sanity I cannot accept the idea that they are all meaningless. Higgeldy piggeldy, indeed.

Nevertheless, somewhere in this great improbable universe exists a race of "aliens" that has hit upon a way to communicate, fully and elaborately, without language, without abstraction. Think of that.

Each of the five poems I've reproduced at the beginning of this piece is flawed. Ben Jonson, for instance, should have written: "Would'st thou heare, what *words* can say?" This makes better sound and better sense. Similarly, toward the end of Frost's narrative, which I like greatly for its accuracy of language, its acute observation, and its good humor, qualities that any resident of northern New England can verify and appreciate, the poet should have put a damper on his didacticism; his fear that his poem could not elucidate its own meaning is too blatant—a common fault with Robert Frost. But then, I've never read a poem I couldn't improve. And this, believe me, is the most important way in which influences work among capable artists.

I've been asked to include one of my own among the poems quoted here.

What To Do

Tell your mind and its
    agony
to the white bloom
    of the blue plum tree,

a responding beauty
    irreducible
of the one earth and ground,
    for real.

Once a year
    in April
in this region
    you may tell
    for a little while.

A small, inconsequential piece, yet it pleases me greatly. I feel lucky, genuinely and gratefully, to have written it. Maybe I didn't write it. Two Bens have been immensely influential in my life, Ben Jonson and Ben Webster. Probably one of them wrote it.

GILLIAN CONOLEY

Gillian Conoley was born in Austin, Texas, in 1955. She studied journalism as an undergraduate at Southern Methodist University and went on to earn her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She has published four books of poetry with Carnegie Mellon University Press: *Some Gangster Pain* (1987), *Tall Stranger* (1991), *Beckon* (1996), and *Lovers in the Used World* (2001). *Tall Stranger* was a nominee for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Conoley was winner of the Pushcart Prize in 1996, and her work was included in *Best American Poetry* in 1997. She was awarded the Jerome K. Shestack Poetry Prize for 1999 from the *American Poetry Review*. She is married to the novelist Domenic Stansberry. They live in the San Francisco Bay area with their daughter, Gillis.

Training Films of the Real

I.

Late shank of the evening: ligustrum pollen on yellow walnut leaves,
two small girls playing, in sun, young retinas virtually empty

as: while pumping gas one sees immaterial ones randomize rest
stops,
as: in life,

black is, blue is, as in life green becomes.
A red slashes

a red divides white scallions along a scaly riverbank.

A few new sprouts of cress a crazed environmentalist
shouting *get off.*

As in life, I had meant the yellow
gaze of an ecstatic over the unstainable industrial carpeting.

In the weedy old Victorian sheltering the beakers, scales of the
meth lab,
oh yes it's karmic to print money.

Woman in creamy white slip lacy bodice a can of Colt .45
one finger fastening the small rusty buckle of a strap.

May the baby wake. Restoring respect to the teamsters.
Tremelo in the pipes
as cold and heat trade places.

For the sound of a lute out on water she applies light makeup
and sings, *Don't Explain.*

II.

Teenagers xerox
genitalia. Well that's a big if
what could they *mean* by that

expanding moment
leaves falling
entire afternoon

spent looking

at the inscrutable,

days, days

each blind
poet

with magnifying glass over OED

akin

to Dostoyevsky's
never,

no sound of the gun to come ringing through the ears,

nevermore,

nevermore,

Green

bottle of pills scattering across a tile floor

POW in a recliner tuning his ear to the choir of his camp

as winter and spring depart.

III.

For better feng shui
I'd eat a low stack of silver dollars.

The key to it all dangling on the tool shed wall
within a soda's reach.

The aliens haruspicating overnight my heart spleen

which has nothing to explain to the chest cavity.

Nor to the forest's blondest wood.

If you have to smooth grammar to get clear,
—most imperial royal model

bits of jade at her clavicle— may we
twin the nouns,

may we twin the whole experience
while better demons butter the downtown.

The wind tithes.
The wind
tithes and punctures trying a piece of scenery.

People slow to see the lights across the pond.

May the time come. Loved,
unmocked conduit stretching a whole figure over the sun dial.

Mail the jail cell house one's valuables in the dell.

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ
Saint
Translated from the French by Henry Weinfield

At the window frame concealing
The viol old and destitute
Whose gilded sandalwood, now peeling,
Once shone with mandolin or flute,

Is the Saint, pale, unfolding
The old, worn missal, a divine
Magnificat in rivers flowing
Once at vespers and compline:

At the glass of this monstrance, vessel
Touched by a harp that took its shape
From the evening flight of an Angel
For the delicate fingertip

Which, without the old, worn missal
Or sandalwood, she balances
On the plumage instrumental,
Musician of silences.

EMILY DICKINSON
1090

I am afraid to own a Body—
I am afraid to own a Soul—
Profound—precarious Property—
Possession, not optional—

Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—

Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

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I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,

And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then—

JACK SPICER
Phonemics

No love deserves the death it has. An archipelago
Rocks cropping out of ocean. Seabirds shit on it. Live out their lives
on it.
What was once a mountain.
Or was it once a mountain? Did Lemuria, Atlantis, Mu ever exist
except in the minds of old men fevered by the distances and the
rocks they saw?
Was it true? Can the ocean of time claim to own us now adrift
Over that land. In that land. If memory serves
There (that rock out there)
Is more to it.

Wake up one warm morning. See the sea in the distance.
Die Ferne, water
Because mainly it is not land. A hot day too
The shreads of fog have already vaporized
Have gone back where they came from. There may be a whale in this
ocean.
Empty fragments, like the shards of pots found in some Mesopotamian
expedition. Found but not put together. The unstable
Universe has distance but not much else.
No one's weather or room to breathe in.

On the tele-phone (distant sound) you sounded no distant than if you
were talking to me in San Francisco on the telephone or in a bar
or in a room. Long
Distance calls. They break sound
Into electrical impulses and put it back again. Like the long telesexual
route to the brain or the even longer teleerotic route to the heart.
The numbers dialed badly, the connection faint.
Your voice
consisted of sounds that I had

To route to phonemes, then to bound and free morphemes, then to
    syntactic structures. Telekinesis
Would not have been possible even if we were sitting at the same table.
    Long
Distance calls your father, your mother, your friend, your lover.
    The lips
Are never quite as far away as when you kiss.
An electric system.
"Gk. ηλεκτρον, amber, also shining metal; allied to ηλεκτωρ,
    gleaming."

Malice aforethought. Every sound
You can make with music.
Tough lips.
This is no nightingale. No-
Body's waxen image burned. Only
Believe me. Linguistics is divided like Graves' mythology of
    mythology, a triple goddess—morphology, phonology, and syntax.
Tough lips that cannot quite make the sounds of love
The language
Has so misshaped them.
Malicious afterthought. None of you bastards
Knows how Charlie Parker dies. And dances now in some brief
    kingdom (Oz) two phonemes
That were never paired before in the language.

Aleph did not come before Beth. The Semitic languages kept as strict
    a separation between consonant and vowel as between men and
    women. Vowels somehow got between to produce children. J V H
Was male. The Mycenaean bookkeepers
Mixed them up (one to every 4.5)
    (A=1, E=5, I=9, O=15, U=21)
Alpha being chosen as the queen of the alphabet because she meant
    "not."
Punched
        IBM cards follow this custom.
What I have chosen to follow is what schoolteachers call a blend, but
    which is not, since the sounds are very little changed by each other
Two consonants (floating in the sea of some truth together)
Immediately preceded and/or followed by a vowel.

The emotional disturbance echoes down the canyons of the heart.
Echoes there—sounds cut off—merely phonemes. A ground-rules
    double. You recognize them by pattern. Try.