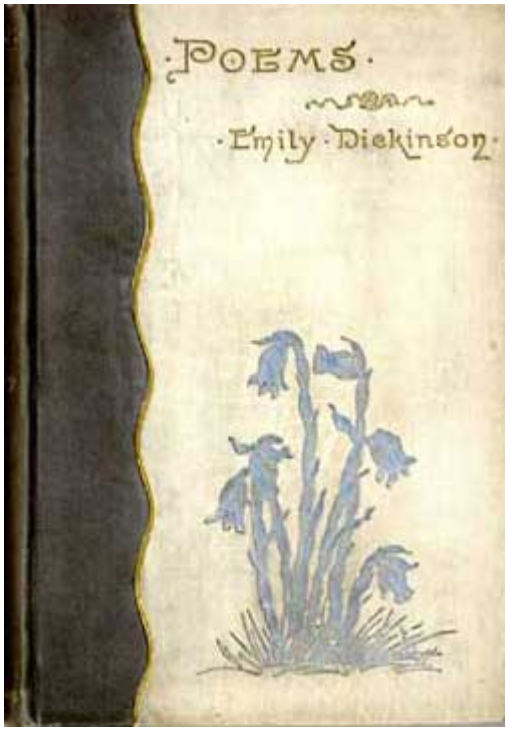
from The Emily Dickinson Reader



Statement of poetic research

One day I decided to rewrite the complete works of Emily Dickinson in “plain speech.” She wrote, in an almost foreign English, 1,789 poems about life, death, and who and what she wanted to have sex with. If she was worried about death, I said that she was worried about death. If, for example, she wanted to have sex with the idea of “sex” itself, I simply restated that and called this “translation.”

I was in a seminar on Dickinson’s poetry in which our discussions of, and reading about, her creative work placed an inordinate emphasis on her biography. Each poem was consistently “unlocked” by the time in which she wrote it—who she had a crush on at the time, which one of her relatives had died most recently, and so on. The minutiae unearthed and recorded by the Dickinson biography industry had became the most important part of every poem—despite the fact that we actually had the poems to read. There was no real harm in it, but we treated the poems more like souvenirs than reading experiences. It was as if the poetry were something the facts of her life had produced, and we, her newly instated audience, having a sort of memoir-driven discussion relatable to *our* lives, were making ourselves the facts of her new life and its heirs.

I started by jotting down notes in the margin, applying a *Cliff’s-Notes*-esque reading. Paraphrase is also an act of translation. So I was translating the poems from one history and language to ours.

(#s correspond to the R. W. Franklin edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*)

900. I rented one of my vital organs from the hospital and now I have to give it back.

901. The relationship between the soul and the body is tentative.

902. The relationship between the body and the soul is tentative.

903. Escapism is what makes life worth living.

904. I like to believe that walking under ladders is unlucky because approaching life with a consistent sense of logic is too heartbreaking.

905. By dissecting a bird you can locate its vocal cords.

906. Even though we live in the same city, we're in a long distance relationship.

907. I'm glad I'm dead, but I hope death isn't death.

908. Worms can't wait to eat us. Actually, they can wait. And they are.

909. If you wanted to have sex with a bee, I would dress up in a bee costume, Sue.

910. Once you find something, you'll probably lose it. And then go on an epic exploration looking for a mythical blanket. And then you'll probably not find the magic blanket. And then you'll probably realize that your whole life is a sham.

911. You know it's cold outside when people start dying of overexposure.

912. Things exist no matter where you go.

913. Matter contains potential energy.

914. I was lost, and then I saw a family living in a house. Everyone appeared to be so comfortable and at home there that I felt even worse about being lost. I tried to join them, but they closed the door before I could get inside. I just wanted to live with them. I don't know why they wouldn't let me live with them.

915. It's autumn, and I don't know what to do.

916. Who lives in this mushroom?

917. Ghosts like to haunt familiar places. They're not that into travel.

918. The fact that I'm alive and that other people are alive is very disorienting.

919. I want to be so famous it physically crushes me.

920. I prefer scars to jewelry.

921. I hope it snows so that all the zombie-children can have a snowball fight.

922. I like sunlight unless I’m hungover.

923. I have a small crush on the man who delivers ice to our house. I hope he notices when I’m dead and feels a little sad about it.

924. I better be immortal. Otherwise, I’ll be really sad.

925. I don’t care if someone kills me as long as they’re attractive.

926. I walk funny.

927. Dying’s worse than not dying. Just so you know.

928. Nature is only important if humans say it is.

929. Would you still love me if I were a zombie? Would you give me a big sloppy kiss on my rotting-flesh-zombie-mouth?

930. Poets die. Poems, on the other hand, corrode slowly.

931. If the oceans wanted to take over the world again, there’s not much stopping them.

932. If God didn’t survive on a steady diet of human souls, he would probably kill all of us immediately.

933. I guess maybe Heaven isn’t a prison.

934. My friends died and now I don’t know where they are. Maybe Vegas.

935. I guess it’s autumn now. Summer is a sneaky little bitch.

936. I guess it’s nighttime now. Daylight is a sneaky little bitch.

937. You either become a man by going through puberty and gradually aging into adulthood, or you can just skip all of that and go ahead and die.

938. Death is a commie.

939. The only good things that exist in life don’t exist.

940. How often do you have sex and where can I go in order to watch you have it, Sue?

941. This guy probably drowned himself. I wonder what it was like. I wonder if

he’d mind if I took his hat. Probably not.

942. Now that you’re my slave, you don’t get two weeks paid vacation.

943. I’m really upset that my slave got away, because you can’t buy them anymore.

944. Nature’s kind of gaudy.

945. If someone’s trying to kill you, the best thing to do is hide until they give up, and then give yourself away. That way you’re the one in control.

946. Dying is only unfortunate if you have friends. Luckily, I don’t have any. Take that, death.

947. I put my money in a savings account, so it could earn interest.

948. God lets it all hang out in spring.

949. Death always ruins a party.

950. It’s been two years and the raspberry bushes I planted in the backyard haven’t produced any fruit. Come on.

951. If nobody loves you, you should probably just go ahead and die already. Thanks, Sue.

952. It’s more noble to die at sea than to go on a cruise.

953. God likes it when people make castles, because he enjoys making ruins.

954. If you want my V-card, you have to give me yours.

955. I sing when I’m scared.

956. Everyone’s beautiful. It just takes a lot more effort to see the beauty in certain people who aren’t as attractive as the people who are actually beautiful.

957. People should be allowed to hate their jobs and not get shit about it.

958. It’s spring. There are daffodils. Someone is sexually reproducing at this very moment.

959. My dead mother finds me embarrassing.

960. My heart isn’t good at long-range planning.

961. Dying people are pretty laid-back.

962. Society distracts me from my precious hallucinations.

963. It’s hard to control nature. Nature or human nature will eventually destroy us.

964. Zombies get no respect.

965. I can’t find Heaven. I couldn’t find it in Connecticut, so it must be in Maine, or else Canada. I hear that Hell is located somewhere in the Midwest.

966. Death is good because it cheers up people who really wanted certain people dead and who can now move on with their lives, happily ever after.

967. Two lovers are dying of cold. The first lover says to the second: I think this is it. We’re goners. The second one replies: No big deal, now we get to go to Heaven. So they did. And their friends slowly joined them, one by one. (I’m not very good at telling jokes.)

968. Fame is nice but is also limited by the short span of human existence. I’m sorry, famous people.

969. God’s kind of like an old aunt who wears a lot of rhinestones and hugs you a little too hard. It’s difficult to get away from her. Sometimes I wish I could go to the beach and be by myself. But it doesn’t really matter where you go, she’ll follow you there, because she’s creepy like that.

970. Mountains are like really old fat people.

971. Peace and God are great, but I don’t actually believe in any of that crap.

972. You either get into heaven or you don’t. It doesn’t really matter what you do. It’s all politics.

973. When I die and death tells me I have to stay dead, I’m going to be like, “No thanks,” and see what happens.

974. This entire town was on fire, so I called the fire department, and they told me it was just the sunset.

975. Someone died and I’m sad about that. Based on how sad I am, he was probably the most important person to ever have existed.

976. I don’t know where they put the month of May now that it’s over. Though they might’ve put it somewhere about eleven months in the future.

977. I wish I was good at something like climbing mountains, so I could feel like I was better than other people.

978. You have to believe in things that don’t exist, like yourself.

979. Bees have a really good sense of style.

980. Love is important because it encourages sexual reproduction and a general resistance to the natural human urge for death. Except if it’s with Sue.

981. The Virgin Mary has enough magic up her sleeves to cure cancer. She’s just a lazy witch.

982. I want to help people so I can feel good. I’ll start with myself.

983. Hurry up. I want to have weird sex with you.

984. I can’t get any satisfaction, and I prefer it that way.

985. When I lie down on the grass, the grass is probably screaming silently to itself.

986. I’ll have sex with you unless you’re scary.

987. I wish I was as sexy and as dead as my ex-girlfriend.

988. Death wanted to have sex, but everyone turned him down, so he gave up trying. He’s not looking so good these days. He kind of let himself go.

989. Sometimes I forget that air exists.

990. Woodpeckers burrow holes into trees in order to eat insects that live inside of them.

991. Trying is more important than succeeding unless it isn’t.

992. I didn’t see her for three weeks and then I found out she was dead. I hate the 19th century.

993. Dead famous people don’t care when famous people die.

994. This guy I know shot himself in the head.

995. I don’t care about things because I care about things that don’t exist.

996. I’ve never lived so good as I have since I became a zombie.

997. People who are in Heaven are generally happier than people who go to Hell.

998. Happiness is nice, but I still want to suffer at least a little bit.

999. Spring isn’t spring unless I’m getting laid.

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Conscious Allegory

Statement of Poetic Research

My first real awakening to the poetic pursuit that has filled the last ten years of my writing life occurred outside of my graduate work, outside of any class. I picked up a copy of Thomas Hariot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia.* Certainly, the language triggered in my ear a visceral reaction to an unexpected music, foreign and familiar at once. But

what struck me most in reading this first book describing the world known as America was the simple but difficult fact of witnessing a text in direct relation to that which was unknown. For the first time I began to understand that the work of poetry is not only a concern with the beautiful, and the complexities therein, but is also epistemological. Hariot's language describes what it also feared: wilderness and bewilderment. The catalog of resources became not simply a store of colonial enticement, but became for me the nervous and emotional categorization of a new world whose deeper resources lurked more darkly in the woods. The language hesitated in front of the very thing it named; it changed the way I thought about poetry.

It also resulted in a series of poems, "Hariot's Round," which mimicked that language, put that older tongue into the poem's speaking voice. I began to sense that a mode of language opened up a mode of perception, and in ways to me still quite miraculous, to learn to sing in that language isn't simply the post-modern gesture of appropriation, but more fundamentally, is the ongoing availability to see and think with eyes other than one's own. My poems began to be populated: Mary Rowlandson, Samuel Sewall, William Byrd II, Thomas Morton, Edward Taylor, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jones Very, just to name a few. A poem didn't just open for me the fact of the historical. The poem became the unexpected ground in which history could be entered, could be brought into proximity, not to consider objectively the facts, but the opposite, to confound them back into experience.

This poem, "Conscious Allegory," comes directly out of my recent teaching of John Keats and Emily Dickinson. When asked who she read by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson, in part, replies: "You inquire my Books—For Poets—I have Keats— . . ." I became curious, to put it mildly, to discover in what ways Dickinson's reading of Keats could be felt within her own work. Such a question feels as if it should be the stuff of an essay, but I didn't want to discover the connection so as to explain the connection.; I wasn't seeking an argument or a conclusion; I wanted to discover the thick of that influence, and the only honest way I know to do that is to attempt to write a poem. Such a poem, in a strange way, seems to write itself. That is, I guess, the poem puts itself into conversation with the work that engenders it, and does so by including within itself the words or work it wants to enter into. Poetry is paradoxical in just this way (or in this way among many ways): if poetry wants to forge a path through the woods, it must first create the forest; if poetry wants to bridge a gap, it must create the distance it crosses. The reader familiar with Keats and Dickinson will note dozens of overlaps—from Keats's editing of Endymion's typesetting to his definition of negative capability, from Dickinson's shock at her friends' marrying themselves away to her Master Letters. The effort isn't conclusion; the hope is complicity. What end does it come to? Well, in the poem, none at all. It begins where it ends in part to put into question the space the poem opens within itself. I don't mean the formal effort to be coy, though I see it can be accused of that. I mean to posit the poem in the curious reality the imagination opens, seeing that the work of imagination is one of the complex links forged between Keats and Dickinson. Imagination creates a

world that exists by not existing—but it’s not that simple. There is no world but this one to imagine. And so imagination as a poetic act calls into question the ways in which beauty, desire, thought interact to posit the world as real. That’s no answer, I know. I hope it is a question.

Conscious Allegory

The first line of this poem ends right here.

The comma should be at *soberly*,

The next comma should follow *quietly*,

As I will demonstrate. Soberly, quietly,

He wrote down the first line of his poem:

The first line of this poem ends right here.

Beauty kept obliterating consideration

As the sun scathes the daisies at noon.

I mean, consideration kept wanting

Obliteration to arrive, as if I might say,

By example, the word *matrimonially*.

Some petals are for *love me*, and some

Speak more desperately other

Imperatives. Hands, cover my wounds.

But I have no hands, only these petals of

This poem’s second line concerning grammar

Is dry and without tone not on accident.

This poem circumvents that wandering

That happens against its own limit as if

By chance, but in this poem there are no

Accidents, no discoveries to be made,

No Cortez, no starry ken, no mask

By which I mean to say, no Magellan.

I have no petals, only these eyes that ask

What is All? A syllable

That threatens to explode.

Ask a volcano, What is beautiful?

The smoke says what isn’t told.

But I digress as does the cloth

Of a transparent dress

When a woman suddenly turns

And turns again in a kind of indecision

The fabric follows late behind

The body making a choice.

How many doors in the absolute dark

Are open, and how many closed?

The rhetorical question never arrives

Dressed “in white.” I only put it on

Around my head to distract you

As when a child points up into the air

And says, The ash is falling, the ash is

Falling, and then I am the empty streets,

All of them empty, of Pompeii.

I don’t mean to embarrass you

With my shy ways. I sit down

At one table almost each day,

A sober, quiet, method or way

To return to the first point, a period

That tells the breath to end

Because the music has ended.

I don’t need to wear a mask

To pretend the woman is naked

Underneath her dress. Poor daisy knows:

The first line of this poem ends here.

[Poems]

Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet)

I had been twice to Pond
before I learned you had
not only been there, but filmed it.
Of course I felt stupid, losing
the trail so clearly marked.

Each time we went, all hundred
of us plus the Russian crew, some
older one who saw the steep climb
from the beach, the long dirt road
to the store and cultural center
became visibly daunted and then
was offered a ride on a four-wheeler
by a passing elder.

Each time drugs were offered
by teenagers on the co-op steps
(*coop*, I kept seeing). *I want to kill myself*.
One of the black poems inked
on the porch rail. Once,

a whale (narwhale, beluga) rolled
in the tideline chip. Just spine
and gristle, but the rope
that tied it a brilliant yellow
and its lungs the lapis of Keats.

After throat singing and Arctic
games, I bought a copy
of your film. It is on the shelf
by my desk, still wrapped
two years later. There are
so many reasons I am
afraid to watch it.

On Beechy

The stones on the graves, like all the other stones, are fossils:
corals and crynoids from the old seas of an old climate. There is a lot to say
about Franklin, the man who ate his boots and whose grave

is not among these, is not yet known. And Lady Franklin,
who made sure his ghost was chased across the Arctic, his name
hove into news. On the point above Somerset House,

built and stocked should he return, ruining in Arctic time,
my favorite cairn: rocks topped by a steel plaque, metal etched
with a man in thick-framed glasses. Caricature of a scientist

from a time even stranger than Franklin’s, another lapsarian age.

Iron hoops that once ringed barrels of food and fuel
decorate the shore, circle stones. A ship’s mast points out
toward where they might have gone: horizon, heaven, hell.

We wander. We avoid what’s forbidden. We wonder
what’s in the brass tubes laid out like kindling. Someone
keeps watch for bears. Someone talks about history.

I pry a fossil from frozen mud. I don’t want to leave
anything of myself, but to take a mnemonic of what I’ve marked,
marred? That tribute feels right.

Thinking of Places I Have Begun to Know

Yearn, yearn
what bloom has gone
to paper now, brown?

What bulbil ready
on which stalk?

Campion, gather
your snow drift
Your loess-blanket

Which bay is iced?
Which glacier slows?

Leaves here, south burnish
Then an odd warmth
& grass sprouts

Which lead? Which polynya
What hunt now
at Pond, at Clyde?

What, shot, drapes
the snow-go,
the towed sledge?

Oh my holiday knowledge
My Augusts   Deep
in years but not broadened
to seasons I try

to picture it   Caribou
over the tracks of caribou
left last year that
I walked   Fox white
Ducks gone   And what remains
and so belongs

Things I think you'd hate about Provincetown in 2008

Portuguese families cashed out and moved to Truro.

Apples, chokecherries, peach plums, rose hips, blueberries ungathered. Fallen.

Not so sure about whale watching—you may have even liked it.

Condos on the edge of the quaking bog.

That so little’s changed (taffy, kites, summer’s ephemera).

That town hall still stands but this year’s town meeting will be in the basement of the high school annex, hall condemned and funds for repair uncertain.

Fast ferries.

Unsure about the old museum with its ½-scale model of the *Rose Dorothea* repurposed as the library; the old library a real estate office.

(Where did the art, the horse-drawn fire truck, the model of Harry Kemp’s dune shack go?)

Drag queens balanced on segues.

You’d love the West End Racing Club—Flyer in his eighties still teaching the kids to swim and sail, still terrifying in his blustered love.

Wired Puppy—fancy coffee sipped while blogging.

Maybe Ellie, who each night sings in the town square, linebacker shoulders, short skirt, heels.

My slant attention and squint questions.

Maybe me—childless (you were, too), paired to a woman twelve years older than me (thirty years between you and Miriam), calling this place home and yet so often afield (your ship not even housed here, but halfway north, in Maine).

Statement of poetic research

In the Wake of:

MacMillan Pier:

I’d worked on boats that docked there for years before thinking to ask who it was named for.

On the Display at the Museum:

Stuffed polar bears? A kayak? What did they have to do with this place, with what the town’s landmark tower was built to commemorate: the landing of the pilgrims?

Discovery:

Maybe it was Flyer (or Dan?) who told me about MacMillan. It started to come together. I was leaving Alaska, half returning. I was done with the manuscript of poems about explorers and ice. I was moving to California for a fellowship

and my love was moving back to Cape Cod. How are distances bridged? How do you return to a place that once was home? I looked for role models I could fight with. Hello, Donald B. MacMillan.

Sleuthing:

I read all of Mac's books. Hunted down his old *National Geographic* articles. Got into the museum archives to read his cranky letters about the proper management of collections. Tried to get to Bowdoin to visit the Peary/MacMillan museum (just a drive away but for some reason still unseen). Found a goal: go north.

A Plan is Hatched:

I pulled strings. I schemed. I got work on a boat in the Eastern Canadian Arctic.

Getting Hooked:

More than I ever expected, the landscape and history resonated. Deeply. There is nothing like the world above treeline—small flowers huddling together to create enough warmth to bloom, seasonally thawed ground soft/hard/rolling/mushy underfoot, horizon. And to come upon rings of lichen-covered stones that, centuries ago and then just decades ago, held down skin tents? Ancient foundations with old copper kettles and monofilament fishing line? To feel miles and hours and moods of looking suddenly collapse to a single, hot point: Bear. Musk ox. Walrus.

I am a slow writer. I know this now. A late bloomer. A deliberator. I hide under a rock and try and be the rock. Quiet. Spying can you teach a lot. I spy on myself. I try not to get caught. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies: the observer changes that which is observed. Observing changes what is observed.

After writing the poems of my second book, *Approaching Ice*, which investigated the romance of polar exploration as an armchair traveler, I wanted to write into the high latitudes differently. Living in Alaska made the Arctic less theoretical. More familiar and also more complex. It was no longer distance and discovery that moved me, but the concept of a storied land. A land beautiful and inhabited for millennia.

I wanted to be culpable, to find a way to look at place more deeply and with more at stake personally. The idea of investigating place through a conversation between two people (myself and MacMillan), two places (Provincetown, the Arctic), and two times and all the awarenesses of each (his, mine) began to develop. It would be an intimate dance, a wrestling match of cultures, a frustrated love song.

The fact that all our lives, here and there, are being affected by climate

change and other human-sourced impacts was part of the draw. Cape Cod is low-lying and sandy. Sea level rise is on the minds of insurance underwriters. The Arctic is a place on the globe where temperatures are warming more than elsewhere. The most toxic lake in the world is on a remote island north of Norway—airborne mercury and organo-pollutants fall out across the north. What will happen when all the methane stored in permafrost is released? What will happen when ice no longer covers and so reflects light back from the ocean's surface?

How does a poet write about highly politicized issues in a way that is integrated with both nature and culture? In a way that is seductive? In a way that isn't didactic?

Donald B. MacMillan made thirty voyages to the Arctic. He almost went along with Peary when Peary made his dash for the pole. And he was born in Provincetown. A place with deep meaning for me. I was not born on Cape Cod. I wasn't even born on the East Coast, but I came of age there, in a way. I moved east for love, stayed, and fell in love with the place, too.

What drew me to Provincetown was both its physical beauty and its culture. I even liked its tacky fringe. There were boats, artists, oddballs, writers, and secrets, which for me is an ideal mix. Queerness is the norm (although there a conservative countermelody can be heard on the wharf, in the schools, tossed from rolled-down windows of cars stopped in traffic), which allowed me to live without needing to consider sexuality, to defend it or figure out how it might or might not define me *against.* I can't say strongly enough what a freedom this was and is.

MacMillan didn't spend his whole youth in Provincetown. His father died in a fishing accident, leaving his mother to raise him. She couldn't quite manage, so he left to live with relatives in Maine. As an adult, he returned. He married a woman thirty years his junior who, when *she* was growing up, "played MacMillan." I haven't yet figured out how to wrestle with that strangeness.

Mac, as people called him, built a schooner, the *Bowdoin*, and took it north. He brought Miriam. He brought color film. He brought boys in a floating classroom. He died near the time that I was born. We didn't quite overlap, but it was close. I am not a continuation of him, and yet

I don't know how the story will end, how the book these poems begin will shape its arc. I'm trying to hold off a bit. Next summer, I'm scheduled to work again in the Arctic, and for the first time part of the trip will be in Greenland. Mac spent a lot of time up there. How my trip will shape the way I see him and his trips, how I see the Arctic itself, how I interpret his interpretations of the land and people, is a blank on the map.

Meanwhile, things accrue. Home, I walk by Mac's old house every once in a while. The broken antler on the strange orange elk mounted over the front door dangles for the fourth year, still not broken off. Would Mac have fixed it? Or

would he not have noticed, too busy living again, from home, his time away?

I'm going to try and convince the owners to let me go through the house. Or maybe sit on the porch. Look out over what has changed, what hasn't. Try and figure out how to celebrate, castigate, laugh and mourn at once.

Further Reading

Biographies of MacMillan range from the young-adult-appropriate *Captain Mac: The Life of Donald Baxter MacMillan, Arctic Explorer,* by Mary Morton Cowan (Honesdale, Pa., 2010) to Everett S. Allen's hero-worship-esque *Arctic Odyssey: The Life of Rear Admiral Donald B. MacMillan* published by Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1962)—note the suspicious overlap of publishers between Allen and Miriam MacMillan. Miriam MacMillan, whom Donald married at age 60, wrote a fair amount for the general public, and one can sense the hand of Mac behind them: *Etuk: The Eskimo Hunter,* Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1950), *Green Seas and White Ice: Far North with Captain Mac,* Dodd, Mead and Company (New York, 1948). I had high hopes for juicy tidbits in Miriam's *I Married An Explorer* (London, 1952), but alas. Samples of MacMillan's own voice can be found in his two full-length autobiographical accounts of his explorations, both written fairly early in his career: *Four Years in the White North* (New York, 1918) and *Etah and Beyond, or, Life Within Twelve Degrees of the Pole*(Boston, 1927). I do wish he'd done more writing in his later years. *Kah'da: Life of a North Greenland Eskimo Boy* (New York, 1930) is a more romantic/fictionalized view of the North by MacMillan. Mac's articles in *National Geographic* are also rich. One of my favorite moments is his explanation of why the musk ox rubs its hoof to its eye.

The Largest Glue Factory in the World

Forgetfulness is like a song
that, freed from beat and measure, wanders

Hart Crane

When knowledge will cover the earth
like water covers the sea

Peter Cooper

A Walk through Blissville

I’m traipsing through gardens that once were farmers’ fields,

looking for burrs and ostrich ferns. An ornery African priest

shoos me out of his orchard as this November sun sets

beyond his apple trees. I breathe in sassafras, burning leaves, lichen,

liken the day to 1891 when the Smelling Committee of the 15th Ward

punted up the Newtown Creek to catalog the stench. Maybe I’ll

glimpse a cedar waxwing or Labrador duck before heading home.
Or wild turkeys running across a treeless boulevard, like I saw
in Staten Island, spitting distance from the Fresh Kills compost.
Lately I only dream of offal, garbage scows and gulls, plowing up
East River cul-de-sacs with carcasses of carriage nags and cows.
I pass black limo parking lots, cement factories, cracked asphalt
of the L.I.E, poke around for cabbages and a place to start my slow
seepage of words to combat stress, the weariness of the same old odors.

Black-Crowned Night Heron

A mile and a half up English Kills, we spy a heron with an eel in her beak,
high in an oak above the dead-glass water. Shouts from the Schamonchi,
a Martha’s Vineyard ferry with a box-container swimming pool, that
thick brown sludge will keep channel worms alive. At Furman’s Island,
the remnants of the largest glue factory in the world, Peter Cooper’s
rendered fat works before they moved upstate to decimate Lake Erie.
Here fish bladders were boiled to isinglass for parchment and for beer,
and collagen from cows was used for furniture and violins. Here origins
of Jell-O are found in the slurry and dross of civilization, burning skies
a purplish hue. The distant tip of the Chrysler Building can be seen
beyond digesters of a sewage treatment plant. Rat powder, azo dye,
methane, turpentine, soak the oily banks where no otters somersault,
by waterfront luxury lots for 2025. For now it’s the heron that patrols
the creek, in search of a millionth minnow to steer here after midnight.

The Endless Chain

I smell Epsom, lime, and sulfur in the wind today off toadfish mudflats.
Cord grass matted with mud snails, tern quills, a stink of conch decay.
Picture tidal mills that pock the marshes of New York, years before
a crossing of the Brooklyn Ferry. Grinding corn at Gerritsen’s near
Mill Basin, along the Bushwick creeks, where breweries sprang up
by pigsties, mill wheels driven by Peter Cooper’s saw-tooth chain.
Picture the East River with cable iron to replace the narrow boats,
barge mules, dike dogs, and towpaths of the canal at Canajoharie.
I dream lug nuts, gear parts, for mechanical advantage, propelling
elevated trolleys along Third Avenue, dripping creosote and ash
onto a maze of pushcarts, with steam and smoke of locomotives
down below. I keep inventing things to let the pull of sea and air
do the heavy lifting, like an American language unburdening itself,
like the endless chain of our forged relations, hauling us forever on.

At Jamaica Bay

A paradise for glossy ibises! Even in January, with rime ice forming
on cattails, the shorebirds congregate. If humans were bodies of water,
I’d be Jamaica Bay, always in the shadows, a rusted heap in shallows,
a piano standing mid-pond near the Raunt. I trudge in snow
with my daughter, who’d rather be at Bell House in Gowanus
for an indoor barbeque. But a hundred kinds of moths live here,
and some say it would have made a great world harbor. Railroads
bought all shipping rights-of-way, and a cross-borough parkway
made sure it stayed an undeveloped swamp. I like its relative obscurity,

a gleaming gem despite the half-dead oyster beds, the noise of jets,
dilapidated fish oil fertilizer farms. Fields of kale, urban rangers
spearing Styrofoam our parents left on trails at Dead Horse Bay.
A cloud of countless passenger pigeons, a pirate’s dinghy. Not even
Peter Cooper saw its promise, despite his designs on New York City.

Plants of Manhattan

My friend’s exhibiting pressed flowers from the Arctic, but only ones
that grow right here. I find a spot in underbrush to note the long parade
of indigenous and invader. There’s a weed patch north of Harlem,
not far from Spuyten Duyvil, where I’ve found a cache of flora
dating to the Pleistocene: seaside amaranth, Macoun’s cudweed,
colic root, cow parsnip, meadow zizia, Jesuit’s bark, widowsfrill.
There’s nodding chickweed, blue huckleberry, American ipecac
sprouting by my knee. Lotti’s got New Jersey tea like Peter Cooper
used to brew. There’s kinnikinnick, leatherleaf, prickly bog sedge,
not to mention scald weed. Have I made up these names myself?
Azure bluet and wild leek blanket the ravine, while swamp pink,
skunk cabbage, spread out in shafts of light. Evening primrose,
orange grass, common moonseed. I see so many Manhattan plants
but wonder why there isn’t any cursed buttercup or common juniper.

At Penny Bridge

We take a rose to Calvary, in the name of countless girls and boys
who died of cholera, exhumed at midnight, ferried to this rural tract
where the dead outnumber the living, a million unkempt tombstones,
in shoddy Gothic churchyards fed by man-made ponds and peaks.

We walk under elms and evergreens and climb a plain of worry,
gathering toadstools in a glen. We want to smell a cinder
in the wind from ancient chimneys, and lie in fragrant fields
of white impatiens bursting into bloom. We scull to an island
of industrial decay, by the hulk of a boxcar and a red caboose.
We chink at mausoleum doors and clocks all stop at once.
We watch monk parakeets mob in a potter’s field, at closed-down
tram-stop Penny Bridge, where mourners used to come in droves.
We stand on a hill to see the sea, the far-off tomb of Peter Cooper
in lavish Green-Wood, where he sleeps and dreams of Tinker Toys.

A History of the Newtown Creek

Forgetting is a measure of the mind in a city that’s hard at work:
The smell of linseed oil, the smell of pine, the smell of opalescence
The smell of hyacinth, the smell of burning rubber, the smell of wax
The smell of car exhaust and coal and tar, the smell of sap and vitriol
The smell of squalor, diapers, dogwood blooms, the smell of sex
The smell of sharkskin, selfishness, anemones, the smell of wine
The smell of eucalyptus, locust droves, axel grease, and lemon rinds
The smell of boiling bones, of caulking and pickle barrel brine
The smell of goldenrod and ragweed, paint fumes, rotten fruit
The smell of sweetened gelatin, creampuffs, fresh-baked bread
The smell of gunpowder, oily, oak-hewn hulls, hydrogen peroxide
The smell of diesel, tar, mud flats, cat clay, peat moss, gasoline
The smell of weariness, of dog-tiredness, of autumn in the wind:
Forgetting is a measure of the heart in a city that’s found at rest.

Statement of poetic research

Journal October 2010-March 2011: The Making of "The Largest Glue Factory in the World"

October 5, 2010: Do you start with an idea, a scent, a flashback or a dream? When you take on studying the life of Aaron Burr, Paul Cuffee's ideas of Back to Africa in Sierra Leone, a day in the life of the Shay's Rebellion, or eating habits of King Philip's Pokanokets, what is the initial flash of thought? Something you read, a shadowy childhood memory, an overheard comment in a bar, or a trip on the water on a crisp autumn day?

October 6, 2010: What will dictate the form of this new conversation? Remember the map of Europe as portrait of Queen Elizabeth (or is it the other way around?). Enumerating all the stars, with touch points to Orion and Andromeda. A legend of the Atlantic sea floor, with names of seamounts and canyons where life began. A truck route through Nebraska. The biography of an inventor.

October 7, 2010: Fourteen lines per poem, twice as many breaths, a wistful turn toward the end of each stanza, a hint of love and loss. Timelines (of industry, information technology, human genomes, battleships, Islamic art, feather beds or cars) and lists (craters on planets, forgotten street names of Manhattan, birds, spiders, parts of the body, etc.). You might call them photographs from an interior life lived a hundred years ago, delivered in a whisper.

Fourteen poems to construct the project grid, using a loose sonnet form, as well as echoes of the Persian ghazal (using the name of a persona, in this case Peter Cooper), with an emphasis on olfactory things we smell by day and by night.

October 10, 2010: I want to map a moment in the changing landscape of New York City, topographically, intellectually, spiritually, scientifically, and through the sense of smell, as seen around the Newtown Creek—bordering Queens and Brooklyn (the most polluted and trafficked body of water in America in the 1850s), as agriculture and mercantile spirit gave way to industry and railroads.

October 11, 2011: I am fascinated with Peter Cooper, at once abolitionist and candidate for the U.S. presidency, pre-Gilded Age self-made man, railroad, steel, and manufactory entrepreneur and social reformer interested in the rights of working men and women, but also a great polluter of the New York waterways. His glue factory stood mid-creek for years.

October 13, 2010: James Agee's *Brooklyn Is* has fired me up, and takes me back to Hart Crane, candy factory heir, who—after Whitman—was the great democratic voice of a developing industrial world. Many a poet (Philip Levine) and historian (Daniel Walkowitz) has told me to use the vocabulary of the world I am trying to evoke! I want to capture here the world before Crane, figuring in the invisible and the meandering, as he put it:

Forgetfulness is like a song
that, freed from beat and measure, wanders

October 14, 2010: Putrid and fabulous smells all around, a history of the Fresh Kills compost (after 9/11's last remains), the Brooklyn waterfront, time as defined by mule barges poling the canals, a bustling, creosote-dripping Third Avenue El, great cemetery interments of mid-century (when all the dead of Manhattan were re-buried in a belt of ever-expanding cemeteries in Queens), underwater circuits of an urban sphere, the mythic and historical roles of Peter Cooper. Why do this now? Unlike the sage of *Leaves of Grass*, I write in the twenty-first century, looking back at all those green graves and glory. I see a future for the creek.

October 15, 2010: My daughter Lotti moves to Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and joins the Newtown Creek Alliance (shortly to be designated a Superfund site for cleanup). I walk over the Pulaski Bridge where we meet for tea at Ash-Box (we dream up billboards to be seen from the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway). Just look at the creek, with its sailboats and numinous flotsam! Now I get to thinking.

Barge Park

We walk up Box Street past stray cat chicken coops filled with straw,
looking for Queenie, our neighbor's Abyssinian. Wild green grapes
climb a chain link fence near sets for *Boardwalk Empire*.
A lake scow, Lucinda May, channels bits of scum and filament
from an underground lake of oil that bubbles up towards English Kills.
The whole history of science has been accidents at work: time pulling
backwards against your un-hunched shoulders and wistful smile.
The drawbridge opens for a tug. At Jungle Press, lithographs
dance on vellum, cross-hatched flags and dresses and kittens,
to mark a sense of urgency, our love for things that come from nothing.

October 18, 2010: Lotti suggests we take the Newtown Creek boat tour, a source of historical riches, thanks to the Working Harbor Committee, with Bernie Ente and Mitch Waxman on board. Notes and photos abound: the old plank road to Maspeth, a green heron fishing in the black mayonnaise of the waters.

October 19, 2010: After a tour of the creek, I dive into the dust and gems of history, my way … walking, talking to people, a trip to the Queens library in Jamaica … looking at pictures … and back to Peter Cooper, whose glue factory was here as well as upstate, still polluting Cattaraugus Creek in Gowanda, New York.

October 21, 2010: I start to look at Peter Cooper's life—he was a great proponent of education for the working class—seeing the agrarian, Jacksonian past melt away into cottage industry and the smelting fields of Bessemer, where Cooper was to make his money. During his lifetime, with incentive, cash, and ingenuity, he wrought a revolution amongst the belching trains, the reeking barrels of brine and pickles and the horse-cart log-jams.

October 31, 2010: Giant plush-red Elmos, vampire anesthesiologists, poodles in serapes. It’s Halloween in Jackson Heights. How to start to capture a history of every neighborhood in Queens?

November 5, 2010: Picture North Korean middle-schoolers, hoeing yarrow on a hillside in the cold. What sort of corollary for this in Peter Cooper’s day? The coal-smutched, sooty-eyed, toiling children that Jacob Riis took pictures of?

November 13, 2010: My life as an oil spill (an idea for a painting or the crushing feeling of wanting to make a difference in the life of the Newtown Creek):

- Lakeview Gusher 1910
- Deepwater Horizon 2010
- Gulf War Oil Spill 1991
- Trinidad and Tobago 1979
- South Africa 1983
- Brittany Amoco Cadiz 1978
- Nova Scotia 1988
- Gulf of Oman 1972
- Pylos, Greece 1980
- A Coruna 1976
- Torrey Canyon Scilly 1967
- Newtown Creek (Greenpoint) 1940s to now

November 30, 2010: Biked over the Pulaski Bridge to the Newtown Creek Nature Walk, at the city’s water treatment facility, built as a part of the percent-for-art program with the Department of Environmental Protection. George Trakas, an environmental artist, integrates Lenape and Canarsie Indian names and indigenous plants growing sideways up the towering concrete. Three teenagers are smoking hash in a weed-infested cul-de-sac behind the chop-shops and barges filled with trash-compacted cars.

December 1, 2010: Just focus on how everything smells: St. Johns wort, baby’s breath, wet dogs, fish-kill, stagnant water, sewer gas, hydrogen sulfide, bikini wax, liquid penicillin.

December 17, 2010: Trip to the Cooper Union library, my old haunts. Ecstasy in the library: meandering across boundaries of knowledge. Read about 1883 eruption of Krakatoa (and global optical effects, including *The Scream* and red-skied watercolors by William Ascroft); 1894 smelling committee tour up the creek, animal glue for woodworking, *Aristotle’s Masterpiece*, Jell-O from horse hooves, etc.

January 3, 2011: Want to read all of *Clarel* (out loud), Melville’s Holy Land epic, the longest poem in the English language! And more about the human bottleneck (11,000 BCE). Also want to research the evacuation of Newport.

January 18, 2011: I dream of the Queensboro Bridge in 1907: it's half finished, a giant steel structure on two stone foundations in the middle of the river, going nowhere. Traffic on each side continues its daily orbits, unaware that when the bridge is finished the world will be changed forever.

February 5, 2011: A poem like a gear-shaft pull-chain towboat rig, back when there were breweries in Bushwick (think of Emily Barton's *Brookland*, of Colm Tobin's *Brooklyn*). Teeth—friction—backbite; insouciance!

February 11, 2011: How to paint in memories of the canals and ponds of Manhattan, back when half the island was farmland? What about the East Side Bus Terminal where I first met my beloved better-half? When I finish the glue factory poems, I must honor Blood Alley or Death Avenue, where cattle pens, coal docks, breweries, and abattoirs all thrived before they were bulldozed for the U.N. Secretariat.

February 19, 2011: I say to Lotti on an iPhone "I'm spelling licorice" instead of "I'm smelling licorice." "To err is human" is the heart of well-made art.

February 25, 2011: What do attempts to make a world port of Jamaica Bay have to do with Peter Cooper? It's the inordinate will to power, like Robert Moses and his Belt Parkway or Donald and his Trump Tower. Cooper was a parvenu, with designs on all of New York City, at a time when a single man had vast power to shape his surroundings. And for all that, we have the leaking, fuel-oil mess of Newtown Creek.

February 28, 2011: Paw palm graze scrape skin lick lap tongue mouth burn tweak pinch. Swum in the sea, unbelievably. Gather a list of everything ever written about the ocean.

March 3, 2011: The poems are complete! I take the Q53 bus out to Jamaica Bay to walk and to mull over what I've done. Who reads poetry anymore? Who reads history? How will we (humans) know who we want to be, except by setting examples, finding good models (or bad ones), and putting them into a form that rests outside of the stream of everyday information gush and gossip?

There's a snowy owl about, and sanderlings. I find a coconut in the salt creek marsh. Who knew? The looming brown mass of Starrett City, in front of the gleaming skyline of Manhattan, reminds me how we've transformed the landscape, but a light crisp breeze says otherwise.

All Things Go on Past

THE

SLAVE'S FRIEND.

VOL. II., No. I. WHOLE No. 13.

EMMA.

Emma was the little girl whose Papa once asked her, what made every body love her. She replied, you remember,

Caroline Remembers Her First Mistress, Darla Ford

When I think on it, it is of joy I recall. And knowing not. Not yet. *Ain't I got a pretty little crop of niggers coming on? Do my little niggers want some bread to gnaw on?* Small being what it was, our minds were full of maybes and the bread was good. White folk talk. Black folk quiet. Green leaves turn to gold then back to dirt like most things done gone by. Once the missus sliced my palm, *she said just to make sure your blood was red*. She cut and cut a line then dulled the embers snaking, now held my hand in mud. I could say things changed, everything was dark after that, after knowing she would cut me like a calf. I grew inward like a nail.

Tobias Finch Tells How He Raped His 11-Year-Old Slave, Clea

That girl lived in herself quiet as an instrument keeps music. How bold her stillness, her ability to remain righteous as a torn daisy no matter how I grabbed at her roots. I meant to unravel her justice, find her private place. Learn her. A slave to study. But, she was a green fruit in my mouth. A spiteful thing. How daring her silence, as if she could hide. Who could have guessed she would not flinch or beg, her eyes a trained voice, moving about like a calf. The nimble slide of her neck. Her hands small and crooked as walnut shells. How she seemed like my own child. How outrageous that she would remind me. Her naked figure nothing to me but a black stain on my clean, white sheet.

Zebedee Ponders What It's Like To Be Sold

When they tip my head back to look at my teeth
I see—

> the mouth of the iron bell
> wider, wider than an iron pot.
> Its tongue a black fist that makes music
> though its song is always the same.

Living And Dying: Clea’s Reincarnation

Been born five times, four times black. Progress of me unsteady as a sparrow branch-gripped in wind.

That slave time, I don’t want to hear no tell. Of chains and sea trips. My missing finger. Longed for comfort to come like Jesus in the cool of the day, but there always was locusts.

My eye got shot in a war. A glass one I had, plopped it in an old jam jar that watched me when I woke.

Pretenses I had. One life spoke Creole. Wore a whiskery white suit.

Once, a saint; my soul clung to God the way an egg grips its separate parts.

Born White one time. With hands full of mathematics. My lover was numbers. Can’t say any of the bodies I had for hundreds of years was finer.

Each life walks parallel streets at the same pace. I am dead in each. Time is the devil, but I ain’t saying he’s fast. All my rooms are quiet like the dark after fire.

All things go on past. Jesus be with me to the end. To die and live outside my mind without a mirror. Show me roots below the hours. The heart in its jerky box. Driving rain holds the answer. Go on and be glad I think I’ll be.

Gather up my thoughts, scatter like wasps. In my hand, a broken bowl.

Edwin Stanton’s Aside To His Wife

I’m having a wedding dress made for your burial. I have chosen the silk. It is soft as melon. No corset nor buttons. Just a sash to buckle you in. A fistful of geraniums to fade with. There is husbandry in these last measures. I’ll speak with the seamstress. Tell her to risk gossip at the wake: embroider the bodice with Christ’s crown, for now you’re his bride. But no coming Easter, nor season will soften these gestures. (Be quiet now old self, go dark. Soon she’ll belong to the ground).

Lincoln Among the Peacocks

A cluster of them. A tumult of rigorously hued feathers caught in knots bound them to their tethers. Who thought to leash these birds? Why twine such legs to trees? To keep the orthodoxy of man and animal would Lincoln have thought? If he were me. I’d like to be boxed in that skin for a day, that hour in the garden with the peacocks. Lean as tooth root and just as white with my beard

skin-stitched. Just try to pluck it. I'd plant my feet on the lawn and grab blue necks. Hold them tight. Cut them loose easy as crushing glass in my fist. All the while aware of my body in his body, my hand in his hand. In black suit I'd be ornament among the feathered gowns now trailing free of hindrance. Forget Lincoln, I'd be a peacock. My coverts would dazzle. My headdress a torch song. The rigor of my gait untarnished by him who held me by the throat.

When I began conducting research for this project, I found many of the slave narratives I read, and the interviews I listened to, frightening. One that I will never forget was a recorded interview of a former kitchen slave who could not speak but sang all of her answers to the interviewer's questions; she sang bits of old spirituals, and she never once answered a question directly.

I was most interested in the strong ideas slaves held about proper burial. Many believed that if you were not buried, you were forced to stay amongst the living in some way. You could not enter into any kind of restful afterlife if you remained unburied and did not have a funeral. In some ways, this isn't so different from our own culture: American funerals today are often about telling stories about the dead as a way of honoring them, of remembering their good parts and quirks. I thought that if I wrote about a group of slaves, it would be a way of honoring them, of honoring their lives, however dismal. My characters were not to be buried correctly by fellow slaves; they were to be "buried" or "sent off" by me, in poems.

I continued to research about slavery and then stopped after a while because what I discovered as I read deeper and deeper into the history of slavery was simply unbearable. I began to look at everyone I passed on the street, imagining us as we might have been during slavery: that person would be a master, that person would be a slave; who would I be as a light-skinned "mulatto"? Those kinds of questions began to trouble me a great deal. I started to really distrust white people, for example, an especially bothersome feeling as I am half white. To continue writing, I had to stop researching. I felt I knew enough about what had happened during the history of slavery for my poems to continue to come from an authentic place.

I had wanted to ask my father about his great-grandmother, a former slave. When I was a child, the only thing my father ever said about her was that she was very violent, very mean. My mother advised me against asking about my great-great-grandmother—and I heeded her advice. About a week later, I had a dream in which a group of slaves was standing at my kitchen window, looking in. I felt certain that those dream slaves were real, and they were asking me, however silently, to write about them so that they could have their peace and rest. I also felt certain that the slaves I was writing about were somehow related to me, and that I would discover my ancestors by writing about them. I trusted these people would come to me via writing the poems, and they did. I determined that as someone who is half African American, I hold the experience of slavery

somewhere in my unconscious mind. I also decided that if I focused only on writing about it, my hand would unearth whatever was hidden in my internal historical memory. Sometimes, I think I *was* Clea, the main voice that arose in this project, that I am just a continuation of her life, and that I wrote her story from personal experience, a personal experience that was uncovered by my difficult foray into research about slavery.

Poems, from Spoils of the Park

Plaque commemorating Ralph Waldo Emerson's sojourn on Schoolmaster Hill. Photograph courtesy of the author. Click to enlarge.

A Walk in Franklin Park

An entrance leads into some nondescript woods, to a dale where a dilemma presents itself: to follow the enticing stairs up the rocky hill into the forest, or the path into the tunnel? The path enters a wall of puddingstone, reminiscent of grottoes at Tivoli, which you can hear the traffic passing over. Olmsted marked his parks with the crushed concrete of skyscrapers, to accent the green.

A grotesque frame for the “magic wardrobe” effect: on the other side of the tunnel you discover countryside as Browne or Repton might have sketched it. “Country”: a broad open green, a valley that curves invitingly upward, toward masses of trees on the outcrops, framed by giant oaks. One half-expects flaky-coated sheep to edge into the open. But instead, here and there, the isolated figure of a golfer.

It is the hour of the conjugal stroll. Couples on bicycles, debriefing the day. The TB patients wear hospital smocks. A facility operated by the Massachusetts State Department of Public Health was built at the foot of Olmsted’s park. Public open space is vulnerable to schools, low income housing, hospitals, zoos . . . all such “spoils of the park.” It can be a lovely situation for the convalescents.

As one follows the rim of the gentle valley, traffic whizzing up the carriage way to one’s left, a textbook succession of beautiful landscape views, only missing the sheet of water, unfolds. (Yet something a touch rough, even savage, haunts this composition. The materials are not quite “right,” American picturesque.) Olmsted preferred to speak of his parks in terms of music.

A poem at Schoolmaster Hill commemorates Ralph Waldo Emerson’s stay there, while teaching school in Roxbury: “Long through the weary crowds I roam; A river-ark on the ocean brine.” The poem includes references to frozen hearts and hasting feet, driven foam, secret nooks, frolic fairies, and groves “Where arches green, the livelong day,/ Echo the blackbird’s roundelay.”

An origin myth for Olmsted? On spiritual maps an “origin” can mask the true point of emergence. From the bench—the best view at Franklin Park—watch the golfers tee off in succession. To exit the park, follow a curving path. It curves some more. Follow it, curving. You are getting Olmsteded. It’s like watching an accident unfold in slow motion. Nothing you can do about it.

Olmsted’s park designs are delightful when you have leisure but a nightmare when you have to get somewhere. (Can I have some leisure please?) You see a greensward at the end of the curve and can only hope against all odds that it is not the same greensward you just left. You spend a lot of time going nowhere. There is something monstrous about the loop.

For all your study of this park, see how lost you are? Your knowledge of the park is only as good as your knowledge of the neighborhood. Those “planned neighborhoods” one sometimes mistakenly turns into, when trying to get across town. And the refreshing life of the unplanned. What lurks beyond the green screen? How do I get out of this damn park?

General Scheme of Power Distribution of the Niagara Falls Power Company, *The Niagara Falls Electrical Handbook: Being a Guide for Visitors From Abroad Attending the International Electrical Congress,* St. Louis, Mo., September, 1904. Published under the auspices of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, 1904. Courtesy of the SUNY Buffalo Library, Buffalo, New York. Click

to enlarge.

The Power of the Falls

In the 1870s Olmsted and Vaux marked the head of the Niagara River, and by association all the waters of the Great Lakes, with Front Park. In the late 1880's they would mark the landscape where those waters drop over the Niagara Escarpment on their way to Lake Ontario—a major hydrological and aesthetic power spot, the Goat Island Niagara Reserve.

By 1882, seven mills along the Niagara Gorge north of the American Falls produced power for Jacob Schoellkopf's Hydraulic Power Company. Partly thanks to Nikola Tesla and his alternating current transmission system, this power reached Buffalo in 1896—completing a loop of water and electricity, sent back upstream, the first long distance transmission for commercial purposes.

Buffalo soon became the City of Lights. Frederick Church, whose huge painting "Niagara Falls" was first shown in 1857, lectured sometime before 1869 on the Falls' impending ruin: mills, flumes, shops, icehouses, signboards, hotels, and fences defaced and crowded the once natural riverbank. People paid a fee to look through holes in a fence to see the Falls.

Olmsted drafted and delivered a report in 1865 that articulated the philosophical basis for state and national parks, advocating that portions of natural scenery be guarded and cared for by government. To simply reserve them from monopoly by individuals was not enough. They also should be "laid open to the use of the body of the people." Magnificent natural scenery was a commons.

Olmsted's and Vaux's report for the Goat Island Reserve mentions the changing public attitude toward natural scenery: a century before, the Falls might have been termed hideous or awful, while sixty years before, they were looked at chiefly as a source of power. Now their particular weather was sublime. Niagara Falls, once Onguiaahra, the Strait.

In 1763, Seneca Indians killed eighty citizens and British soldiers who were transporting material along the Niagara Gorge. John Stedman, one of two survivors of the Devil's Hole Massacre, claimed the land and islands above the Falls for himself. In the 1770s, he raised a herd of goats on "Goat Island." Listen to the Falls under the creamy white blossoms of the basswood.

To make peace the Seneca ceded to the British a four mile wide strip of land along the east side of the Niagara River from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. The paths and walks at Niagara Reservation are calculated to draw the walker back from the sublime, to linger in beauty, just as Olmsted led Richardson on a long, teasing walk before letting him see the Falls.

The pools, riffles and rapids by Luna just above the Bridal Falls are intimately seductive, without effective barrier. A terrifying intimacy, when you know where it leads: "the densest region of shade merges its identity into

a desperate kiss.” The design invites “an all-consuming thirst for open air and danger.” Listen, and you will hear the massive ground tone of the Falls, just downstream, offstage.

The state cops keep an eye on “people they see standing in the same place for long periods of time or walking about aimlessly, muttering to themselves or looking distraught.” One study has logged 20-25 suicides a year, and notes that the most popular time is Monday at 4pm. Honeymooners flock to the pools above the Falls in a spirit of contradiction.

Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated several miles above me, as I waited for a taco in Niagara Falls’ economic drop-out zone. Here is where Elon Hooker built the ideal workers’ village, on a toxic waste dump. Here also is heroism, where Lois Gibbs organized the Love Canal Homeowners Association, nursing her children in front of national television cameras.

Amidst land scraped bare by retreating glaciers and thrust under the sky, tabula rasa between two Great Lakes, Niagara Falls channels one-fifth the planet’s fresh surface water. Maybe it’s the ions, static in the gorge that lifts the hair from your skull. The park has its rangers and its Mennonites, and its group of communicants, receiving instruction from the Cave of the Winds.

The Canadians played it right. It was only a matter of time before the USA would preserve Goat Island, and erase industry along the gorge, restoring a natural look to the Falls, as seen from the other side. Where Canada’s Frankenstein lifts a Clifton Hill cheeseburger, grinning back at the toothless storefronts of Niagara Falls, USA, the economic gradient feels steep.

In a gentler dell, at a wooded bit opposite Crow Island, upstream of Bridal Falls, the watery mirrors cause us to reflect on the mythology in the course of our lives. Thanatos holds our ankles as we contemplate the riffles. Tesla suffered a peculiar affliction in which blinding flashes of light would appear before his eyes, often accompanied by visions.

The “American Electrician” gives a description of an early tesla coil wherein a glass battery jar, 15 x 20 cm (6 x 8 in) is wound with 60 to 80 turns of AWG No. 18 B & S magnet wire (0.823 mm^2). Into this is slipped a primary consisting of eight to ten turns of AWG No. 6 B & S wire (13.3 mm^2) and the whole combination immersed in a vessel containing linseed or mineral oil.

“It’s called the reverse waterfall. Essentially, the shape of the land underneath the surface of this very narrow inland bay. It’s really deep in the middle, much more shallow on the sides. So, when the tide changes, the middle surges upward and turns into this churning white water, in the midst of a very smooth, placid sort of flow on either side.”

In 1926, Tesla commented on the ills of the social subservience of women and the struggle of women toward gender equality, indicating that humanity’s future

would be run by “Queen Bees.” As she talks to you, the Falls make their own weather. The weather drifts. At the heart of power and contradiction, a delicate spiral rises turning toward the sky.

“Design Map of South Park,” Olmsted Job #718, South Park, Buffalo, NY, F.L. & J.C. Olmsted Landscape Architects, 1888. Olmsted Lithograph Collection. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Massachusetts. Click to enlarge.

South Park

Here is a view of the Niagara River from the Robert Moses Parkway, south of Niagara Falls. Here is a pumping station. Here is Front Park, that once overlooked the head of the river, at Lake Erie, now best seen from I-90, the thruway that obliterated the park. Here is a view of Riverwalk, zig zagging into the Lake. Here is a broad view of the shallowest Great Lake, from the Skyway.

Olmsted honors the lake, courses of waterways and associated wetlands, and employs them as a principal resource in his design, seeing the landscape as the Kahkwa or Seneca did. As part of the whole. Water takes the place of turf, in the kind of landscape composition he has mastered but is eager to adapt to a watery environment, where park goers enter by boat rather than foot.

Olmsted’s Northern designs also shelter memories of the bayou and the “restful, dreamy nature of the South.” These dreams of a lagoon interface with a Great Lake would not mature with Buffalo’s South Park. Even though Buffalo got called the Venice of the North. In the Buffalo South Park proposal, packet boats were to ferry park-goers through islands marked out by windmill-powered lights.

“At intervals there will open long vistas over water under broad leafy canopies . . . verdant grottoes . . . spacious forest glades . . . nurseries for song birds.” The plan is unique for balancing water with land, in an imbricated yet simple pattern, including secluded picnic spots and migratory bird exclosures. Bridging the bounded with the open horizon, Olmsted’s parks are harbors for possibility.

As the 1888 design entailed excavating more than half a million yards of land, Buffalo’s park commissioners deemed it too expensive. Olmsted’s son John and his partners in the Olmsted firm took over the project. Their 1892 plan outlined a smaller inland space, in the “English deer park” mode, that eventually would include a water feature, a conservatory, botanical garden and arboretum.

Olmsted considered the Buffalo parks his “best-planned” system, due to the city’s extensively realized parkways. We drive around in circles, past Father Baker’s Basilica, where the stations of the cross are lit in neon, looking for South Park. After asking directions of a woman and her granddaughter, who give me three tomatoes from their garden, we find the entrance to the park.

Olmsted decries “the present railroad evil” and “the barbarity of a great number of deadly grade railroad crossings.” What fuels growth chokes off life. He proposes a counter-system of parkways, “not to be dealt with on the principle that they are local affairs any more than the parks with which they connect.” Olmsted’s logic was reversed when Robert Moses turned his parkways into high speed thruways.

It is a deer park in the midst of residential and industrial South Buffalo, between rail yards, scrap yards and brownfields, a few miles north of the Ford Stamping Plant. The trees are decidedly less well kept here. Dead snags stand at the edge of the water feature, which is lily choked. On the way out of the park, I photograph a mysterious mailbox, standing in the grass.

I have always regretted the use of a private automobile to reach the park. As part of Buffalo’s emerging master plan, the bicycle paths running up the Niagara River from Tonawanda will be connected to South Park. But who will fill the border vacuum? Who will draw a view of Buffalo from the Niagara River, from the breath of a green artery, from the social dance on a packet boat seen from outer space.

Photograph courtesy of the author. Click to enlarge.

The Foundation of All Wealth

Come to the park bent and unbending
stimulate exertion of parts
receive pleasure unconscious
to influence the mind of
imagination

The lawn curves back of thought
sound minds in sound bodies
all the art of the park
not fully given to words
or enameled flowers

The daisy we did not stop for
therapeutic for the masses
not interrupting us or calling
out gave a more soothing refreshing
sanitary experience

Statement of Poetic Research

My research poetics are less invested in biography than in geography, less focused on rhyme than on response. Crucial to my sense of literacy, of documentation and of history, is an extension of these terms to cover the traces and signs written in the land, or produced in the wraparound space of our environments. Gary Snyder reminds us that, “A text is information stored

through time. The stratigraphy of rocks, layers of pollen in a swamp, the outward expanding circles in the trunk of a tree, can be seen as texts." If by "information" we also mean a nexus of social, ecological and political concern enmeshed in an aesthetics, then we might say that the landscapes realized by our landscape architects are texts, disguised as "nature," and vice versa: and how do we respond to these?

Research then occurs along a continuum from the depths of the archive to depths of the ramble. Walking and writing become extensions of the same investigation. Of course, a continuum on one plane is seen as a series of strata from another, so the poetic researcher attends to how documents get sited, reinforcing established ideologies or inserted disruptively into other planes of meaning, context and conduct. A lot of the poetics of research has to do with re-siting the archive. Or citing the archive in a way that exposes it as non-site. Words need to be carried outdoors, or a bit of earth brought in, lodged in a climate-controlled box. Librarians become exceptionally wary around poetic researchers, for good reason.

The current project, Spoils of the Park (named after a pamphlet Olmsted published in 1882, lamenting what had become of his Central Park), began when I wondered, what would happen if we read Frederick Law Olmsted as we might read one of the great American poets? Olmsted's art has been overgrown by its successes: many of his closest readers do not even realize that his parks were made, nor have they ever heard of Olmsted. In Olmsted's own words, "This may seem a contradiction in terms. It is not. When an artist puts a stick in the ground, and nature in time makes it a tree, art and nature are not to be seen apart in the result." Olmsted's own writings are too focused on the practical to be classed as literature or art; many of his words and actions paint him as a reformer, concerned with public health in an age of hygiene. (Olmsted headed the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War.) Yet Olmsted clearly saw himself as an artist.

Olmsted's parks aim chiefly to affect, beyond the body or the faculty of reason, the imagination: "A great object of all that is done in a park, of all the art of a park, is to influence the mind of men through their imagination." Olmsted saw his parks as settings for "unconscious or indirect recreation." In his designs, he sought an effect on the human organism by "an action of what [the park] presents to view, which action, like that of music, is of a kind that goes back of thought, and cannot be fully given the form of words." Olmsted frequently resorted to musical metaphors when describing the effects of his park designs.

Like the poet, the artist or the composer, the park-maker works with materials of the unconscious, and in particular with what we now might call the environmental unconscious (ecocritic Lawrence Buell coined this phrase). In an essay on trees, Olmsted compares a wild flower on a grassy bank to an imported flower blooming under glass in an enameled vase: "the former, while we have passed it by without stopping, and while it has not interrupted our

conversation or called for remark, may possibly . . . have had a more soothing and refreshing sanitary influence." What touches our senses peripherally most affects our health.

The popularity of Olmsted with the urban planners and their social engineering fantasies took a hit in the 1970s. We now live in a time when the eccentricities of Olmsted's vision can better be appreciated, its successes balanced with its failures, and when a broader view can be taken of the variety of factors contributing differently in the specific case of each park—much as Olmsted himself might have approached his works, more than a century after his death. We also live in a time when the spatial productions of democracy, i.e. public spaces, are fast eroding. Olmsted's nuanced, "impractical" yet wholly pragmatic approach to the complex politics and economics of public space during a Gilded Age may be more relevant than ever.

Much as archives lie in the dark or only come to light through the specialized discussions of researchers (still dark to the public at large), whole greenswards and entangled banks of our urban environments lie just beyond the field of public attention. As Olmsted's principles make clear, in the case of his parks this is partly by design: the therapeutic agency of his parks works most precisely through indirection, unconsciously. In his manifesto, *Investigative Poetry,* poet Ed Sanders urges poet researchers to "leave well-defined gaps in the text or in the presentation equal to the circumstances concerning which they have no knowledge: that is, their AREAS OF DARKNESS." While we have at least four biographies, several book-length studies, and a score or more of coffee table volumes illuminating the work of Frederick Law Olmsted, it turns out that poetry may have work of its own to do, in the greenswards and entangled banks.

If the poem is itself an archive, then its legibility may constitute an anti-archive, or "anarchive," of suppressed or marginalized histories. Poetry begins to generate its own unearthly light precisely when, as Sanders notes, it dives into areas of darkness. Poems (and I consider Robert Smithson's great essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," to be a kind of poem) seem especially suited to sounding and communicating the effects and contradictory vectors of Olmsted's compositions. Only the poet, furthermore (and I consider a scholar such as Walter Benjamin, attuned to the semiotic and surreal surfaces of human cities, to be a kind of poet), grants him or herself permission to bust out the archive in public places, and to detonate public concerns within the linear orders of the library. It is the poet, who is "always on," who remains uncontained enough to attempt wholly impractical acts of reading.

Olmsted's vision, his history, and the history of which he was a part, are vast, complex and ramifying in cellular and indirect fashion, like his parks. Poetry as a mnemonic device, and as a kind of oral record, might help to affix and circulate some of this history, to make it a more active part of the common discourse. I recognize the contradiction in suggesting that we lay bare the

device that functions best through camouflage; but the critical ecological pressures of our times call for a more deliberate approach to our environments, to those environments supposedly in a “state of nature” as well as to the environments clearly bequeathed to us by the designs of artists. Poetry also can retain an echo of, and deploy within its own sonorities, the non-linear juxtapositions embodying gaps, the breaks where the poem’s charge sparks.

The poetic form of this research project is evolving. I have written and spoken elsewhere of the lyrical impulse at the heart of research, especially in the context of natural history research around the intersections of poetry and bird song. With Olmsted, where the materials are more patently historical, I have found the lyric line somewhat intractable. Information, especially of dates and places, of acts and speeches, gets unwieldy around the line break. Or it may be that the expansiveness of Olmsted’s designs calls for a more expansive rhythm, a response at the level of phrase and sentence rather than syllable and word. Much of the project is first drafted as prose and documented through photography and field recording. These layers of the project are accessible at my blog: http://olmstedsparks.wordpress.com

Poems emerging from this prose currently settle into kind of regular, isometric stanza–like boxcar windows on Olmsted’s prospects. I have taken some inspiration from the movement of minimalism in land-based contemporary art, literature and landscape design, where geometric forms are considered more effective (than “squiggly lumps and bumps”) in focusing attention on natural scenes. There may be one other explanation.

Much of the travel for the field work conducted for this project occurred by rail–another underfunded public resource. I wanted to see the landscapes much as Olmsted might have, as he traveled tirelessly from site to site (during his work on the Biltmore grounds, Olmsted even had the use of Vanderbilt’s private rail car). I have aimed to keep track of the class tension, the global effects of the rail industry and the mobility of capital that funded and built these parks.

What does it mean to claim a “poetics” from Olmsted’s designs? To oppose a set of facile analogies–rectilinear, orderly, industrial, urban as prosaic; curving, random, green, rural as poetic? To locate, against the stop signs of the city, a landscape without punctuation marks? Investigative poetry troubles the binaries, such as work vs. leisure, and the associated logic of capital that obviously undergirds so much of Olmsted’s project. Yet what one finds, in doing the research, is that Olmsted himself has already troubled the distinctions.

Further reading

Gary Snyder discusses what he calls “Nature’s Writing” in the essay “Tawny Grammar,” *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco, 1990). There are many books

written at the nexus of walking and writing; two valuable studies are Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton, 1991) and Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman, OK, 1989). On "site" and "non-site," see Robert Smithson, "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites" (n.d.) and "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in *The Collected Writings,* ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, 1996), which volume also contains the key 1973 essay, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape." Many of Frederick Law Olmsted's writings first appeared as self-published pamphlets, such as *Spoils of the Park: with a few leaves from the deep-laden note-books of "a wholly unpractical man"*(Detroit, 1882), or as documents produced by agencies like the Boston Parks Department, which published *Notes on the Plan of Franklin Park and Related Matters* (Boston, 1886). This latter essay includes the comment on parks working like music; thanks to Mark Swartz, U.S. Park Ranger for the Olmsted National Historical Site, for drawing my attention to this passage. The essay "Trees in Streets and in Parks" was published in *The Sanitarian X,*No.114 (September, 1882). The other Olmsted quotations in my statement can be found in *Civilizing American Cities: Writings on City Landscapes,* ed. S.B. Sutton (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). For the "environmental unconscious," see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). Jane Jacob's sociological critique of the Olmsted approach to park design helped tarnish the legacy of his parks during the 1960s and 70s: see *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961), especially the chapters "The uses of neighborhood parks" and "The curse of border vacuums." Ed Sanders wrote the definitive manifesto for poetic research, from an activist standpoint, published as *Investigative Poetry* (San Francisco, 1976); there have been subsequent versions and refinements, such as "Creativity and the Fully Developed Bard," in *Disembodied poetics: annals of the Jack Kerouac School,* ed. Ann Waldman and Andrew Schelling (Albuquerque, NM: 1995). For the therapeutic agency of parks, see Olmsted's publication, *Mount Royal, Montreal* (New York,1881), where he calls "charming natural scenery" a "prophylactic and therapeutic agent of vital value." A more thorough discussion of Olmsted's park psychology can be found on my blog, www.olmstedsparks.wordpress.com (Day 3, Part iii). Also see Robert Hewitt, "The Influence of Somatic and Psychiatric Medical Theory on the Design of Nineteenth Century American Cities" (University Park, PA, 2003). On poetry as "anarchive," see Stephen Collis, *Anarchive* (Vancouver, 2005). Both for its attention to the semiotics of the city (including parks and gardens) and for its practice of citational montage, Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (trans. Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, Mass., 1999) has been inspirational to my own practice of poetic research. While Eric Havelock has written eloquently on poetry as oral record and mnemonic device, in *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: 1988), Susan Howe has taught me more than anyone about the critical vitality gaps and breaks bring to poetic history; see, for instance, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH, 1993). On the role of minimalism in land-based contemporary art and landscape design, see Peter Reed, *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape* (New York, 2005), where Reed cites

landscape architect Martha Schwartz, on the “humanism” of geometry in landscape compared to “the disorientation caused by the incessant lumps, bumps and squiggles of a stylized naturalism.” Too little has been written on the economics of the Olmsted Firm parks (not to speak of urban ecology, more generally). Two exceptions are “Place-based urban ecology: A century of park planning in Seattle,” by Sarah Dooling, Gregory Simon and Ken Yocom (*Urban Ecosystems*9, 2006) and *Eden by Design: the 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew plan for the Los Angeles region,* by Greg Hise and William Francis Deverell (Berkeley, 2000). The best critique of the prosaic urban/ poetic rural dyad, from a Marxist standpoint, is Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City,* especially the chapter “Pleasing Prospects” (New York, 1973).

Poems

Vanishing Point

In the great valley between Hwando and Yazoo City,
laborers tend opium poppies and cotton,
Dying of yellow fever. But on the heights, there is a calm
incense of roasting pork, a delicate mist of flesh

Lovers stroll through to the platform at cliff’s edge
Where they gaze down like diligent scholars
At a landscape falsified precisely for their pleasure.
From there, a faint pentatonic music skirls
Up from the valley floor, where we overseers hone
blue notes from invisible instruments stroked
With the abrasive bow of coal smoke and acid rain.

A Reconciliation

And they were happy in the end, if by *happiness*
you mean *everything was forgotten*.
Time had been deeply layered in their bodies
like the ruins of Troy in a hill. Now the innocent
Cattle waged war on milkweed in a pasture,
while a formation of geese wedged harmlessly
Into the evening air. What had they fought about
endless years ago? Time clarifies nothing,
But buttresses of worked stone dissolve in its weightlessness.
Nothing now to defend except their bodies,
Which survived, growing lighter and more translucent
and more useless. In the night sky, stars convened
In images of gods and humans, watching for a sign
of any remnant of passion, a recognition of blood
Transcendence: old Helen fucking ruined Menelaus.

Statement of Poetic Research

The Skandalon of History

“Vanishing Point” and “Reconciliation” are from a forthcoming book of poems called *Skandalon* (LSU Press, fall 2014), a word that has in English only a ghostly existence in the realm of theology, where it means, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, “A stumbling-block, cause of offence, scandal”—scandal here meant in the ordinary sense, but also in a larger sense: anything that distracts a soul from salvation is both a stumbling-block and a scandal. So, for a heroin addict, heroin is a skandalon; for a potential saint, the stamp collection over which she obsesses, to the detriment of devotion, might be one. Dante’s Paolo and Francesca each are a skandalon to the other. In Christian terms, the entire fallen world is a skandalon—a distraction, and a metaphysical scandal—and so all of human history is one.

Obviously the Greek word *skandalon* is the root of the common English word *scandal.* In ancient Greek, *skandalon* denotes the trigger of a trap, and so all the meanings dissolved in the word by Christian theology, as is so often the case, are metaphorical. The little lever in a mousetrap where one puts the

cheese is a skandalon: the cheese distracts the mouse, and scandalously draws it on to destruction. So the politician's attractive aide might be like the lever in the trap; so, to Everyman, the whole "fallen" world, all of history.

Unpacking this odd word (and there is much more in it to unpack than present space permits) led me, if not to the writing of a book, at least to a means of giving form to one, which may be said to be the same thing. Unpacking a word's etymology is of course a mode of historicizing, and language being, as Emerson famously put it, "fossil poetry," I have found myself, over many decades of practice, often following the thread of etymology through the maze of my own perception of the historical.

Meditating on the maze in which we are fated to wander—take it out of the Christian frame and the consequences of the skandalon are neither better nor worse; it shifts its reference perhaps to the existential, and the trap is the void—has allowed me a fruitful process of casting and recasting the net of process. In "Vanishing Point," the history of privilege is scandalous; in "Reconciliation," the act of reconciliation in the face of fact is.

After the conquest of Troy, Helen and Menelaus returned home and resumed their marriage, "history" tells us. How is that possible? In Euripides's play *Helen*, the two are united for eternity on the Isle of the Blessed. Why? And for the rest of their lives—for the rest of eternity—what on earth (for earth is the ultimate skandalon) must they have talked about?

In the narrative of the fate of these two, what is "history" exactly? Helen and Menelaus are—even on the Isle of the Blessed—the ghosts of a scandal. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts," we are told, but we may equally want to beware of gifts bearing Greeks. Every "fact" of history is—as historians *and* poets learn to their sorrow—potentially a skandalon.

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[“I have begun again to read as I was taught.”]

1. Tracts Trace Fissure

I pick up a fragile, aging photo, asking, “Who is this?”

“No idea.”

Names slip out of records or protected—

No completely legible family Bibles or cornerstones engraved. Conversion over bloodline, family branches missing or far flung. The fissure passed down: this Tract Society—

Question to begin: when no known ancestors of mine were, previous to the 20th century, here present, how do I connect to American history, to the imaginary of the American nation?

One answer might be found by de-spatializing the “here,” by looking to Seventh-day Adventism, the 19th century American religion adopted by my Estonian family while in Estonia, my newly arrived German immigrant great-grandmother in New York City, and my first-generation American grandfather on my mother’s side, one of two brothers who converted and subsequently stopped passing on any stories of their blood families—all “non-believers.” The only thing I ever heard about his mother, my great-grandmother, is that she was not an upstanding woman: “She had many different men over to her Brooklyn house.” I have never known her name.

Fig. 1

2. *The Autobiography of Elder Joseph*

Bates

Catalogued in the American Antiquarian Society library, I discover this book written by an early Adventist missionary.

Am I imagining that my grandmother spoke about her mother meeting him once in person?

While trying to find, I fear my fiction grows.

Search: Adventism, American. Find: a new religion, new country, new self. An emphasis on text and religious scholarship (memory of the shelves of Bible concordances to the right of the fireplace) when none of these ancestors had ever been to college.

Religious literacy as religious liberty as cultural rebirth and upward mobility. Lines drawn away from the old country away from family toward a church family toward:

The Word.

Fig. 2

The missionary movement: to spread The Word.

Did this Elder Bates make contact with my Estonian grandfather? No, the dates are wrong. But when did the Adventists go to Europe?

Failed search: No matches found for Baltics, Baltic, Estonia, Magi. The shame of my autobiographical obsession. Why do I want to find evidence of this first contact?

If I could read the record of the capture of my grandfather’s imagination, his conversion, could I then write my way into complete release?

Fig. 3

3. A New Body

There is an image of my mother as a baby printed up on a postcard and distributed to raise church funds: with every pound she grew, members would pledge more money.

Physical growth converts to church growth and the spread of The Word is the work, is how to be a good Adventist and healthy.

Bodies of belief are bodies valued: therefore the later devastation of her polio.

She survives, graduates eighth grade pictured under a banner reading, “The Value of Hard Work” and visibly changed: face drawn, weary for her age. It is The Depression and school equals work, a promise to plug the dam of uncertainty, of dis-ease.

“My father would not touch me in the hospital” she once told me because she had never figured out that her own parents were always also afraid.

Known or sensed: anxiety. A root, a subtext. Against which, prayer—

Fig.4

4. Scanning

I have already written about Adventism.

In *Threads* I wrote about my Estonian grandfather’s dangerous religiosity during the World War II German and Russian occupations of Estonia. The story is that he had to leave Estonia because he was an outspoken Adventist minister.

I also wrote “pillow of no tradition—resting there” which is autobiographical: I am firmly apostate. I risked the connection, slipping out of that world of The Word—

Now, I am spit out: it is nearly impossible for me to read *The Autobiography of Elder Bates*. I download the file, open it several times, and note my faith in the rhythm of the double click, my readiness to learn. But I read nothing and make no decision to continue to try.

Fig. 5

Instead, I find myself searching this scanned 19th century book for torn edges, errant spots on blank pages, places where a librarian has made marks, and places where those marks have bled through.

Available for the entire virtual world to read, I already know the history of the disappointment of the advent movement and even so, my ancestors believed. In light of this, I cleave to the illegible.

Fig. 6

5. In a Shaking Hand

In my grandmother’s belongings, I find a love letter from my grandfather, written two days before he passed away, written in a shaking hand—

Of his devotion to her and to the church and how surely they will see each other again in His kingdom.

Holding this letter, I think of bindings—imprinting—shared vocabularies—

Fig. 7

What hope holds me to my family of origin, and to my beloved, the family I now make? What if there is no sacred vocabulary? No beyond?

Or, how much is my “pillow of no tradition” a pillow still marked—

Fig.8

Perhaps I wear this religion’s imprint in ghostly reverse—something seeping through, as when I listen to my landlord’s Friday prayer meetings in the basement below my apartment, not able to hear the exact words, but familiar with the cadence of the voice, praying, wondering if he is also—

Fig. 9

6. “I have begun to pray again.”

The above sentence is from section one of a manuscript entitled *GIFT*. This sentence marks my entrance into an inquiry that does not privilege the secular and mock the sacred.

This writing is the second section: “I have begun again to read as I was taught.” Subtitle: “Literacy, religion, and textual practice.”

This is what I call a gift reading practice from my childhood:

I would open my Bible to any passage of the Psalms and read. A feeling that this chance operation was divinely directed to give me a message I needed then, at that moment.

Or I would read the Psalms when I had a stomachache. The pains would go away. I would read Psalm 27 when I was nervous about school. I prayed before every test and attributed my good grades to divine guidance.

This is now the image that I need to read:

Fig. 10

I trace this remnant mark, find pleasure in its edge and shape, its pixilated borders, its mistake. Sitting at my desk, I almost recoil at the sensuality of this mark and its electricity: my now pulsing body, a transfer has occurred.

7. Prophetess

Ellen Gould White, the prophetess of this religion I was born into, had an immense literary output yet she only had three years of formal schooling. She wrote at night, from 1 or 2 am until dawn, when she felt she was most susceptible to hearing and recording the word of god.

It is rumored that she plagiarized Milton.

She was hit in the head with a rock as a little girl and after that she had visions. And so she received messages from god or Milton.

She predicted god would come in 1844 and this did not happen.

How do I read poetry now when as a child I was taught that it was our human purpose to wait and disappointment only renews resolve?

I grew up and out of the religion and I developed a disdain for her, Ellen White—the religion felt, to me, an absolute folly.

Fig. 11

8. Shame

If this is my first lesson in reading and authorship, text and purpose, then how to enter literature in college, cleanly, while secretly stained.

Whether I belong—now an author—this, persisting—

Fig. 12

9. Communities of Desire

Now, telling the story of these practices about which I rarely speak: how faith is gradually entering back into my literacy. Why engage remembering?

One answer: I want to make a connection from a sacred past to an experimental literature in the present. No one expected me to be a poet and write as I do, but it is not such a far flung idea, given that:

Literacy situated in religion is—

An emphasis on study. Growing up, we had lesson “quarterlies” for weekly study. My parents asked me, nearly every day, “Did you study your lesson?”

An emphasis on memorization and therefore sounds. Early memories of star stickers affixed to a chart listing the Bible verses I had memorized correctly. Always in the King James Version, the sound of the poetry of the beginnings of modern English.

There are titles like *The Desire of the Ages*, *The Great Controversy*, *Steps to Christ*: books by Ellen Gould White filled our home. Spiritual handbooks. The word “desire.” How to. The time of the end, “the time of trouble,” approaching. Fear and courage mediated by text.

Fig. 13

10. To instill anxiety and then relieve this tension is to read.

A lesson in scripture: contraction and release. Worry and faith.

To believe that signs are everywhere—”wonders and signs”—and a thin veil separates spirit and world, thin line between prayer and breath.

List everything you are thankful for, quickly, under your breath in case the end of times comes and you are found ungrateful.

Fig. 14

To skim is an acceptable way to read and “seek and ye shall find” because a book is always unbound, aglow, alive, and my mother told me to never put anything on top of my Bible.

To read while making marks: underline, highlight, margin notes. My childhood Bibles are full of these.

My grandfather marked up several Bibles. There are notebooks of his sermons in three languages: illegible marks made legible because of context. The message was always the same on any side of the Atlantic, in any language.

11. Reading the Remnant

That religious belief and religious tracts and texts will draw people together and pull them apart.

Fig. 15

Idea of remnant or outsider: we, “a remnant people,” who will be saved, who may be fringe.

A son or daughter might be on the edge of the fabric or ripped from their family for their righteousness or for their sinning.

How, a continent away from America, one side of my family converts to this American religion leads to my father picking my mother, also an Adventist in his new country his new city.

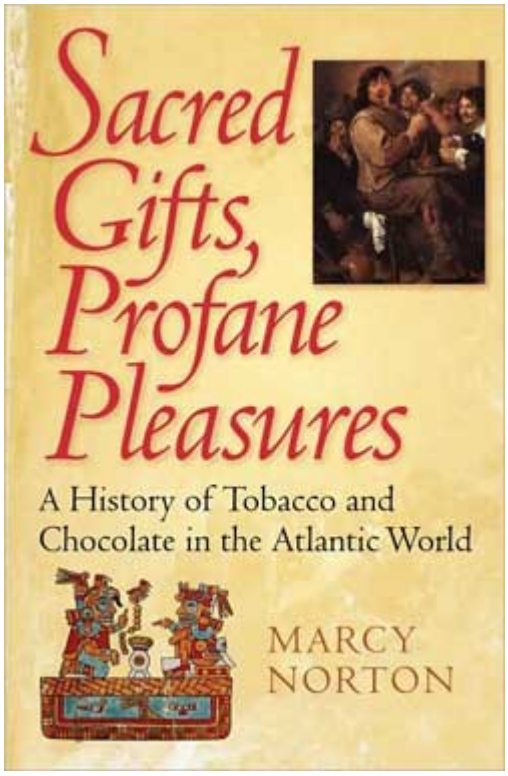
At mid-20th century, when most Adventists were white, religion trumps ethnicity and the difference between native/refugee. All are together, called the same, “the remnant.”

Yet the individual breath and body is always a potential wedge in what is broadcast from the pulpit. A micro-remnant, even if momentarily, making the smallest utterance. Reading, listening for this divisibility—the desire for invention, the desire for belonging—is this my poetics, inadvertently gifted to me by family who took this American religion and read themselves into earthly and heavenly citizenship?

This article originally appeared in issue 12.4 (July, 2012).

Jill Magi’s text/image, poetry/prose hybrid works include *SLOT* (2011), *Cadastral Map* (2011), *Torchwood* (2008), and *Threads* (2007). Two recent collaborations can be found on-line at Drunken Boat and The Michigan Quarterly Review. She was a resident artist at the Textile Arts Center in Brooklyn, a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council writer-in-residence, and is currently a recipient of an arts grant from the city of Chicago. Jill will start a post as visiting writer in the MFA program at Columbia College Chicago this fall.

Smoke on the Water



Europeans embraced tobacco’s healing properties, just as the Aztec did, and the consumption of chocolate in European culture “simultaneously served to fortify social bonds and underscore, or even confer, distinction”

Beyond Biddle

It turns out that historians’ inconsistent chronology had not actually been “wrong”; it was incomplete.