

= * = POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #272 = * =



= * = SPRING 2023 / For Bernadette Mayer = * =

EDITORS | Kay Gabriel, Bianca Rae Messinger, Morgan Vö

COVER ART | Max Warsh, *Eleventh Street* (2023), cut photographs, color xeroxes and inkjet prints on wood, 18" x 24".
Warsh writes: “This collage brings together fragments of images of buildings photographed along 11th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues, a corridor that connects P.S. 19, where we went to elementary school, and The Poetry Project, where we spent so much time during those same years.”

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Editor’s Note

Kay Gabriel

Last November, the poet Bernadette Mayer passed away in her home in East Nassau, NY. She was 77, and the author of over 30 books of poetry and prose. A beloved member of the Poetry Project community virtually since its inception, she ran workshops here regularly from the early 70s through the 2000s, and served as Director from 1980-84.

Mayer’s work, committed to the universalist premise that anyone with any relationship to thought and language is or could be a writer as well, developed method after method specifically in order to make writing more possible. “The thousand episodes the mind enjoys can make a book in a minute, if you’d only write it,” she offered in *Piece of Cake*, her 1977 collaboration with the writer Lewis Warsh. Anyone could be that *you*, and her methods seem specifically designed to make poetic language more pliable and accommodating. A partial list of the genres that Mayer developed or expanded over the course of six decades includes the journal poem, the psychoanalytic diary, the sonnet, the epistolary sequence, the book composed in a determined span of time, collective or shared composition, the Utopian tradition, constraint-based writing, creative translation and even the form of the writing prompt itself, which she and her students in the workshops she taught at the Project amassed together. (In an interview for the *Newsletter* from 1998, reprinted in this issue, Mayer observed to Lisa Jarnot: “Someone said to a friend of mine recently, ‘Your book is filled with all different kinds of poetry.’ I mean, why not?”) In a sense, the work collected in this issue circles a central question: how does Mayer’s writing teach others to write?

Through collaboration, certainly: Jen Karmin in this issue indicates the duration and force of Mayer’s collective writing techniques, and in that spirit we’ve also reprinted excerpts from Mayer’s *The Basketball Article*, written with Anne Waldman in 1975, and a letter and poem from her 2022 collaborative book written with Lee Ann Brown. Equally, through deep and enduring attachment to the friends with whom one writes: as Rainer Diana Hamilton suggests in her essay, friendship for Mayer is in part a way to access “a collective fabric from the language various loved ones had added to the otherwise private and naive closets containing poetry.” CAConrad weaves a review essay of Mayer’s *Milkweed Smithereens* (2022) into a buoyant letter to Mayer, and similarly Elizabeth Willis, Lydia Davis, and Bianca Messinger offer heartfelt reflections on the absence that Mayer’s passing has left on the lives of those who knew and loved her.

Meanwhile, Mayer treats poetry itself as a device for capacious thought—philosophically ambitious, practical, political, and this-worldly. Shiv Kotecha, Matthew Rana, Elena Gomez, and Marcella Durand each explore Mayer’s now-classic experiments in using poetry as an instrument of theoretical inquiry, focusing respectively on *Memory* (1975, 2020), *Studying Hunger* (1975), *Midwinter Day* (1982) and *Utopia* (1984). Rona Cran reflects on the pedagogy of introducing these experiments into the classroom, where “the vertiginous nature of *Memory*’s form and its handling of ideas are immensely freeing for students.” Cam Scott and Tausif Noor explore two recent collections of Mayer’s letters, exchanged respectively

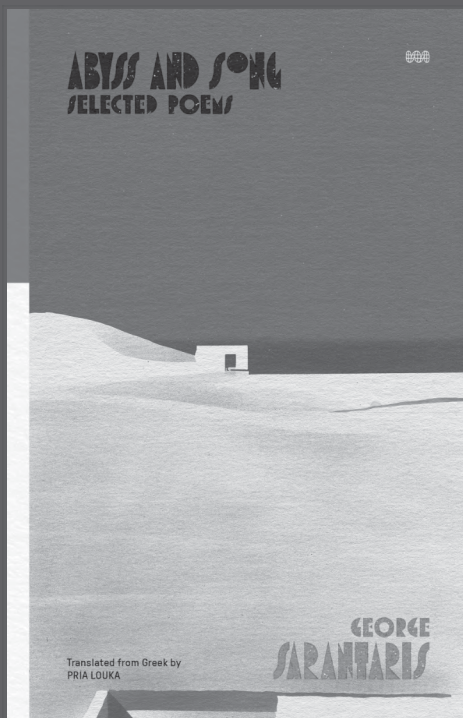
with Clark Coolidge and her sister Rosemary Mayer, in which she clarifies the intent of her project to achieve a “real translation of thought.” The maximalism of this project is palpable both in the prolific extent of Mayer’s own writing, and in the writers who have patterned their work after her enabling list of experiments, several of whom wrote poems in that mode for this issue of the *Newsletter*.

Our intention is for this special issue, a kind of *Festschrift*, to offer both entry points for reading Mayer’s work and theses that change the questions we ask about it. In the introduction to the 1975 *Studying Hunger*, and again in her preface to the 2020 edition of *Memory*, Mayer expressed her desire for an “emotional science” project which might produce “a great piece of language/information.” What was that science project, and what would it mean to achieve it—if not for her, then for the writers she instructed and continues to instruct? *Midwinter Day* links the intimate details of family routine to astonishing philosophical theses and great political upheaval; why, how, and what does that show us? Researchers have scarcely looked at Mayer’s papers housed at UCSD, or the Poetry Project archives at Library of Congress; how might close study of those documents, including her correspondence and notebooks, change what we think we know about her? What work does poetry do in the political project of “giving everybody everything”?

The warmth and insight that Mayer’s work makes possible radiates here across acres of thought and feeling both—mingled forever, as fits her work, steadfast in its refusal to rip the two apart. “All heart I live, all head, all hand, all ear,” Mayer wrote in her poem “Eve of Easter,” and that’s an example, too.

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GEORGE SARANTARIS ABYSS AND SONG

Translated from Greek by
PRIA LOUKA

“In his brief lifetime, Sarantaris produced poems of exceptional force and beauty. These are verses that ache, that unsettle, that thrum with vitality and precision. Pria Louka, in her graceful, finely-wrought translations, has reproduced the essential purity and interiority of Sarantaris’ poems, the same ambiguity and lightness of touch. I will treasure this bilingual volume, and I will urge it upon lovers of poetry everywhere.”

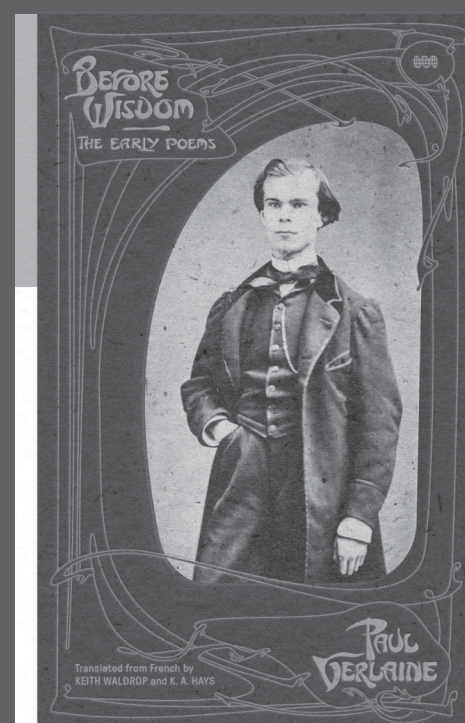
— JHUMPA LAHIRI

PAUL VERLAINE BEFORE WISDOM: THE EARLY POEMS

Translated from French by
KEITH WALDROP & K. A. HAYS

“These remarkable versions of Verlaine’s early work offer a much-welcomed window into the range of his art: his erotic fixations, his chimeras, his alternating exaltation and despair, and, of course, his lyricism.”

— MICHAEL PALMER



GABRIEL POMERAND SAINT GHETTO OF THE LOANS: GRIMOIRE

Translated from French by
**MICHAEL KASPER
& BHAMATI VISWANATHAN**

“The Second World War destroyed more than cities and people, it destroyed language. Pomerand’s solution was to create a whole new language, and then translate it back into French. Here, finally, we have an English translation of that French translation, alongside Pomerand’s new language, one that the present disaster suggests we might still need.”

— MCKENZIE WARK

Life and Death

Rainer Diana Hamilton

In a Tuesday bed, I woke up my phone for its final scroll, as if I feared saying goodbye to the internet, and I saw a tweet that I knew meant that Bernadette Mayer was dead. It said something vague like “o no, Bernadette,” but if she were living, I reasoned, and merely suffering, it would have started “be strong.”

Though I found no confirmation, I didn’t doubt it: she had been dying, after all—this poet who had also lived, and who, by living, had contributed to the conditions of possibility of the writing and the friendships of many of the people I love most—and dying is difficult work that, like all labor, must be followed by rest. Instead of replying to Ian Dreiblatt, whose tweet it was, or having an understandable emotion, or reading a poem by Mayer, I went to my bookshelf and found Dreiblatt’s *Forget Thee*. His narrator tells “Thoth the ancient / egyptian god of / wisdom who is / also a white-haired / baboon and / sometimes an ibis” not to be too sad. Fine advice.

This guy is talking to a lot of gods, reflecting on the remarkable and miserable set of circumstances that has comprised human civilization. Thoth in particular is regretting having given people writing, which he meant only to offer us “another / kind of body to / escape to,” because we have misused it. Instead of using writing as this extra body, he says, we have *hidden* everything we know there. We have converted all things to words, with little to show for it. Dreiblatt’s narrator reassures this god that it wasn’t all a waste: the poems of Bernadette Mayer, after all, remain among the accomplishments of man:

Thoth gets
sad, in a way, he
says, this is all
my fault, writing
is the gift you
didn’t survive

but we achieved so
much, I tell him: pinball, the
poems of Bernadette
Mayer, the music of
Lonnie Johnson, frozen
pirogi, little rooms that
glide between mountains

for a little while, he
says, sure, I mean I
used to be the freaking moon
but you don’t hear me bragging about it

I liked letting the Mesopotamian gods be the

nihilists, leaving the friendly New York poet to defend humanity on the grounds of dump-lings and books. I felt good, reading this, and forgot the assumed news, which would remain untrue so long as I avoided it. (I have been listening to *In Search of Lost Time* on audiobook, and I just got to *Sodom and Gomorrah*, where a running bit of the first chapter is the Duc de Guermantes’s efforts to avoid confirmation of his cousin’s death, so that he might retain his social license to go to the costume ball; I promise myself that’s not what I was doing on 11/22, when I had no ball but sleep to attend, and no claim to Mayer but that of obsessive reader.) I was ready to have a good dream.

I slept for an hour, in a lost scene that was ad-jectival and sexy, like a good review on *Frangrantica*, until the cat began his nightly song, and, irritated with Monster, I scrolled sleep-lessly again. Corina Copp, in an email addressed to me and to Shiv Kotecha, with the subject line “<333333,” had attached a PDF of Mayer’s “Attempt to Write a Love Poem.” Shiv, more purposely awake in Istanbul, had written back: “this is so good!!! I have never read it before, and it is perfect for the morning I’m having (trying to write a poem!)” Right away, he wrote again: “Oh no did she pass.”

I didn’t reply to any of the messages in this thread, the expressions of love or of missing one another, the sign of affection that is decid-ing with whom you’d like to be sad. I didn’t open the attached poem, even though I could have used its model. Having already enjoyed one metonymic avoidance of her death by way of reading a friend’s work, I opened a new tab, searched, “Corina Copp poem,” and read the first one that came up: “Praise Pseudograph V.2 (La Vue),” from *The Green Ray*. I read it aloud, but at a whisper, although I was the only person home—it’s spooky to speak loudly in an empty room, and anyway, I was afraid of making false promises to the cat about my continued availability to hang out—and my volume led me to the lines most like prayer:

[...] the Evolutionary Transformative
Agent, a quality well we all have that
instinctively understands the greater
plan; if we are especially playful,
we have the potential to become
the very ETA itself, just to see
what will happen. Sugarcube struc
ture faces the morphinists we’ll
all soon treat, a red hole perceived
Lost, as a red trout enters

It is hard to be playful in the middle of the night, but I thought then that I would have preferred to be the ETA itself—to embody that instinctive understanding—rather than

merely possessing it as a quality. By the mor-phinists, though, I understood that I had in-vented my insomnia. In a dream, I learned that everyone I knew had been secretly writing “poems of their lives”—long narrative verse meant to continually summarize their sense of self before death—but had been forbidden from telling me; I alone was not meant to write my life poem.

I woke up, saw the email thread again, and tried to change my mood by listening to Luther Vandross’ “Never Too Much,” where he says that “a thousand kisses from you” will never, as the title suggests, be overdoing it. This song always reminds me of Shiv’s *The Switch*, where he includes a transcript of Samuel Delany leading a Poetry Project work-shop and talking about Mayer’s translation of Catullus 16. This section begins by telling a character named Diana (who Shiv, in his poem, is refusing to sleep with)—who func-tions, within the poem, by way of her possible reference to me—to remember:

Remember Diana,
when he started at the end of the poem,
basiorum, and worked his way up the stanza
Bernadette wrote for her friends,

Followed by a long transcript of the workshop
conversation. And now I remember:

She reminded him what he had told

to him and not to her,
that for him, Brandon,

it wasn’t so mechanical. And the number

of the kisses
mattered less than

the deranged state of
the pervert that counts them.

That’s (real life) Brandon Brown, whose trans-lation of Catullus fictional-Diana insists that Shiv read in order to correct his interpretation: Shiv, she thinks, is too focused on counting kisses on fantasized abaci, whereas Brandon argues that “*conturbabimus* is a metaphor for confounding the coinage,” for messing up cur-rency. At that moment, I hoped, Brandon was asleep, in California, with no sense of forebod-ing; for him, Bernadette still lived, and work was still far off, safely in the non-compensated hours documented in his book, *Work*, which takes place on Midwinter Day, as if he were Mayer. I knew Brandon’s translations before I knew him, who I now also know to be the best reader of poetry, and honestly, the best person to have dinner with, but I couldn’t find my copy. I read *The Good Life* instead, specifically the poem “One Fine Day,” where he wants to join the tooting flautists, but he is

troubled by the history
of flautists honestly
they turn out frequently
to be the rottenest

motherfuckers, yes
there is Bernadette, yes
there’s you and you,
my friends, you pipe
you pipe beautifully
and are not evil
but look in the book of
pipers and you’ll see
the pages are soaked
in gore, I read the book
all day, one whole
day, a long day of
reading, piping, breaks, ooh
I take a flute and I put
it up in the best parts of
my lips I keep thinking
one fine day I’ll, one
fine day I’ll...but
when is the fine day?

I then had to listen to the Chiffons and weep, not about Mayer, whose living remained plau-sible, but about “You’ll come to me / When you want to settle down, oh,” and about the Shoobie-doobies, such that I cried myself back into a sleep that showed me Jameson Fitzpatrick conducting operas that, via musi-cal properties she arranged in advance, healed the audience’s wounds, however mortal. Wo-ken by my alarm, I checked the time, learned I was running late, and found a message from Ted Dodson—“if you have five minutes, you should call me and we’ll read a couple bernadette poems.” I called, but the wrong number, his cell phone, which does not get re-ception in Woodstock, where he had just got-ten a half cord of firewood delivered. Not knowing this, I read a poem into his voicemail, which he could not check. On the train to work, I read an excerpt of Stacy Szymaszek’s *Famous Hermits*, a book that, though new, was written when Mayer was among the hermits still living, with or without fame, and Stacy re-minded me—

I’m going to live my life this way
language arrives attention to commonplace
can that energy age us
differently? keep old souls youthful?
you can look at yourself
more closely from a distance
having left documents
to let go of former selves and
their demands
still all I want
is for my friends to read me

—that I was doing all she wants. At the same time, in a different tab, Kay Gabriel was doing all I wanted, reciting dreams I had forgotten back to me—in an excerpt of *Perverts*, draw-ing heavily on the dreams of others (loosely following one of Bernadette’s experiments, where she recommends forming a group and “writing off of each other’s dream writing”):

in another dream of Diana’s we taught
a class together, where Diana was mad at me:
she kept “trying
to sneak away to be bad,” but I would pause
class until she came back,

in Diana's dreams I'm an icon of patience,
not a party monster
not the kind of grad student who checked
Grindr instead of studying for quals
and nearly flunked out into a marriage fated
to crack
for you Diana I kept my infuriating cool
the dog was saved, we taught our class
in another dream I'll reject your cross-bor-
ough marriage proposal

Having elected to stay on the R train the
whole way, to make more time for reading and
less time for transfers, I instead lulled myself
into a commuting sleep, where, using the tun-
nel under the East River as a weighted blan-
ket, I dreamt that Kay and Ian and Corina and
Stacy and Shiv and Brandon and Chip and
Bernadette's words were one. The latter's lines
from "DEATH & RAGE EASILY"—

Now another death makes me think, enters
in & out simultaneous with the thought
Somehow of all that is being written by people
And stored naively in closets & vaults &
letters stacking in libraries
And whatever will ever be read in any future

—seemed now as if Mayer were repeating,
though forty-something years earlier, Ian's
pinball and pierogi, Stacy's living through
journals, Kay's cool and collected records of
the night, Brandon's rotten pipers, Shiv's dic-
tation from Delany's kiss lecture, and so on. I
became briefly lucid, psyched that I would
soon weave, conceptually, if I focused hard
enough, a collective fabric from the language
various loved ones had added to the otherwise
private and naive closets containing poetry.
But dream lucidity, for me, when combined
with pleasure, always breaks up the party; and
I awoke, as the train pulled into Union Square,
just before this vision approached crispness.
At the office, there was no longer sleep or po-
etry to turn to, so I read Mayer's unofficial
obituaries.

Two hours later, I took my lunch break and
went for a walk, where I could finally listen to
Ted's voicemail. He read Mayer's poem "Feb-
ruary 25":

FEBRUARY 25

and resourceful, succumbing to the most se-
cure fantasies,
fantasies of not writing, even fantasies of be-
ing scared or
unhappy, careful what words I use but not so
careful what words
of other people stick in my mind, as if, "in
trouble"

and loved, denying at the least a desire & a
swing
of fantasies evolving & getting lost in the in-
timacy of desire
as only one's own, not shared, and at the
most an assertion of
that love which can be rendered, almost
picked, for a portrait,

it is so clear

and clear, I had even anticipated the book-
bag, clear as that,
not in doubt that, what I want or even need,
but doubt that space
of energy where this clarity remains intact
without violation of
the poses, not of that portrait, one of asser-
tion, but of the
others standing still & still watching

and poses, my own, of the body's exhibition
of strength,
the agility that performs around the exact
center of a mesmerizing
talent for the new, & now I've said the oppo-
site of what I mean,
this is the pose but it is also the strength

and you, the correlation of the resourceful-
ness the love the
clarity and the pose with you in the arc of
the painting that
is being made, in an obsession to be exact
again & that is,
clearly happy in a state of our own posses-
sion, as you possess
yourself when you are writing that poem

His reading was tender, as if each stanza's
"and" really was moving, inevitably, towards
that *you*, and I played it on repeat, pacing 3rd
Avenue. Despite the relistening, though, I
thought the poem was new to me when I read
it, one week later. On December 1, Ted texted
me a picture of the poem and asked if it was a
form he "should know." I wasn't sure, but I was
drawn to its repetition, the way the "clear" at
the end of the second stanza becomes the re-
peated term of the third, and so on; it was a
repetition both loose and repeatable enough to
be propulsive. Both Ted and I being resource-
ful and secure, we tried the form out, then
asked others to do the same, forming The Feb-
ruary 25 Society, whose members include, in
order of their application's arrival, Charles
Theonia, Vinson Cunningham, Kay Gabriel,
Shiv Kotecha, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Elena
Comay del Junco, Marina Weiss, Isabelle
Olive, Anna Gurton-Wachter, Alexis Almeida,
and Corina Copp. For reasons of life and
death, our dinner on February 25, 2023 was
small—six of us—and also big: poems fried
over anchovies, five or more loves. You can
read volume 1 at [https://dianahamilton.xyz/s/
FEBRUARY-25.pdf](https://dianahamilton.xyz/s/FEBRUARY-25.pdf). If you'd like to abandon,
briefly, your own fantasies of not writing, send
a 2/25 poem to:

february.25.society@gmail.com.

This concludes my true and unaltered account
of the night of November 22, 2022, when
Bernadette Mayer stayed alive so long as I
read, instead of the internet, my friends.

We Remember

after the anxiety in the day
before tears in the dark
a desire to quietly praise
someone other than yourself

It's interior and not
close enough

the firewood is moved
next to the stove
close enough to continue

blue sky, above average
warmth for this time of year

time to make maple syrup
returns with one less observer
than last season

it's times like this that make
us remember

Philip Good
2-2023

An interview w/ Bernadette Mayer

Lisa Jarnot

I believe this interview, printed in the Feb/March issue of the Poetry Project Newsletter [#168], was a rapprochement meeting for me and Bernadette. She was settling back into life on East 4th Street, post-stroke hospitalizations and rehab. I was at the end of (or near the end of?) a tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband Lewis Warsh. This is all to say that the circumstances of this interview were probably less than ideal, and yet we knew each other well enough to get right to work. Re-reading it now, I'm reminded of how much she taught me over the years and how much fun it was to conspire with her around the deep gossip of poetry. —Lisa Jarnot

Bernadette Mayer is the author of numerous books of poetry, including three forthcoming publications: *Another Smashed Pinecone* (United Artists), *The Studying Hunger Journals* (Hard Press), and a yet to be titled collection from New Directions. Over the last thirty years her work and ideas have played an essential part in the development of experimental poetry in the United States. This interview was conducted in her apartment on East 4th Street in Manhattan on December 1, 1997.

Lisa Jarnot: Do you remember the first poem you ever wrote?

Bernadette Mayer: Well, actually the first poem that I ever wrote was a poem that I wrote for an assignment, about leaves. We had this assignment at school, that was our homework. So I wrote this great poem about leaves. I think it's not extant anymore.

LJ: Did it rhyme?

BM: No. It was a good poem though. I got an A.

LJ: So that was in Brooklyn?

BM: No, that was in New Rochelle.

LJ: So that was when you were in college. You were an undergraduate?

BM: Yeah. I didn't really start writing until I was about 17.

LJ: So how did you get from New Rochelle to the Lower East Side?

BM: Well, that was very fast actually. New Rochelle is horrible, as you might imagine. At the time it was a Catholic women's college, and they threw me out. But they couldn't figure out why. Their reason was because I read

Freud, and they didn't allow their psychology majors to read Freud until their senior year because it might be a threat to their faith. And I wore sandals. I broke all of their rules. But the real reason was that I wanted to get out of there. I only went there to please my mother. And then, you know, everybody in my family died and I left New Rochelle as soon as my uncle died, because there was no more reason to stay there. I hated it. And for two weeks I went to Barnard, and that was like a two-hour trip from Brooklyn to Barnard. Forget it. So then I moved to the Lower East Side.

LJ: Did you know people here or did you just move here?

BM: No. I just moved here because I knew it was inexpensive.

LJ: When did you first meet poets?

BM: At the New School. I took a class with Bill Berkson and I met all these poets. Frances LeFevre was in my class, and Michael Brownstein. And then I started hanging out with Peter Schjeldahl and then he introduced me to Ted Berrigan. And then Kenward Elmslie used to have big parties at the time, with big boxes of rolled joints and stuff. That was 1965 maybe.

LJ: Did you spend time with visual artists?

BM: Well I used to edit *0 to 9* magazine with Vito Acconci. We didn't really hang out with the visual artists though, we just published them.

LJ: What was the idea behind *0 to 9*?

BM: It was pretty much the same idea that there is behind any magazine—to create a great environment for our own work and to publish all the things that we both loved to see published. So we started publishing the works of Robert Smithson, and the journals of Jasper Johns. You know, these really interesting things, but I don't think too many people were publishing them at the moment, or at least we never read them.

LJ: How much were you influenced by New York School writing?

BM: Well, you know, I had this incredible resistance to any New York writing. I really didn't want to be influenced by it. So I wasn't. I guess I am now, but I wasn't then. We had such a strong resistance that I was going out with Ted Berrigan for a while and Ted and Ron would do these collaborations and send them to *0 to 9* and we would never publish

them. We published one called “Furtive Days.” But we would never publish them and I guess it was because of their style or something. I really couldn't figure out why it was. I used to go to a lot of those avant-garde concert performance events with John Cage and Yoko Ono. They were pretty amazing. I always liked those. I think they influenced me much more than any of the writing.

LJ: What did you think of the poets on the Lower East Side?

BM: I was very inspired. I was so happy to be around poets all the time. And then I was reading, I embarked upon this project of reading all of the long books. That was my theory—I could just read a lot of long poetry books that I had never read.

LJ: So which ones did you read?

BM: I read *The Cantos* and all of T.S. Eliot. I didn't have too much to do. After I fell in love with Ed Bowes, we lived in Syracuse for a while and then I got pregnant and Ed got thrown out of school, and his parents freaked out and they sent him to a psychiatrist in Ard-sley. So I had nothing to do for about a year and I had enough money to pay my rent, so I just read all these books. And I used to listen to WBAI at night and write.

LJ: What do you think of Eliot? Was he an influence on you?

BM: No. Never. I'm sorry, I wasn't impressed by Eliot.

LJ: What was the best thing you read?

BM: Well, it was around that time that Bill Berkson told me I was writing too much like Gertrude Stein, whom I had never heard of. So I started reading Gertrude Stein and that was pretty inspiring. I guess I liked her work and I also liked reading philosophy. Like all those amazing philosophy books. Like Kierkegaard and Heidegger and all the great philosophy books. Much better than going to school.

LJ: How old were you?

BM: I was 19. We used to order all our books from Blackwell's in London because they were cheaper. So we would send these great long lists to Blackwell's, and get back these bills for like 30 dollars and we'd get amazing books. And I read all the works of William Carlos Williams. I read Djuna Barnes and that was interesting. I mean I'm sure I read a lot of things.

LJ: What do you think has changed in the poetry world since the 60s?

BM: Well. It went through this period of being very social, and now it's much less social.

LJ: Maybe it's because people work more.

BM: Yeah, I think so. Jobs. Like it used to be very easy to live without a job. But now when I teach a workshop all of my students have jobs. Like real 9-to-5 jobs. So that's changed. And I think more people are writing. And what's changed a lot is that there are more women writers. When I was first writing we only knew of a few women poets, like Barbara Guest and Diane di Prima. So it's great to see more women writers. That's why I was so honored to read with Barbara Guest. And I remember when I met Diane di Prima, which was also amazing—to meet your childhood heroes.

LJ: Right. That's one good thing about being a poet.

BM: Yeah. Like if you start a magazine or a reading series you have an excuse to write to almost anybody. I mean literally anybody, so that's the reason to do it. That's why we did it. We started our magazine so we could write stupid letters to Robert Smithson. And we were so honored to write to Jasper Johns. I mean nobody was inaccessible. Everybody wanted to publish their work. It was great. It still is actually. I mean I get on the phone now and call up anybody and invite them to give a lecture and chat with them. It's a great privilege.

LJ: What about the 70s and 80s scene in New York? What about the Language scene? You were at the church.

BM: 1971 was when I did the workshop and a lot of the Language people were in the workshop, secretly learning what they needed to know. We used to talk about Lacan. It was a great workshop.

LJ: What did you think of Language writing?

BM: Well, I encouraged it. I never thought it would reach these proportions. I always thought it was a great idea. I'm for all kinds of writing. I never knew Language Poetry would become so exclusive. I mean Language Poetry is fine, but it's one kind of poetry. Someone said to a friend of mine recently, “Your book is filled with all different kinds of poetry.” I mean, why not? Are you supposed to write only one kind of poetry? I don't think so. I love Louis Zukofsky's translations of Catullus, which are not translations, they're just mimicking the sound of the Latin, and they're beautiful, they're great. What Americans really seem to find difficult is when something doesn't make sense. They find it really hard and boring, what's it all about? It seems like you can just enjoy the sounds of words without any other meaning rearing its ugly head. Why bother? Who cares? It's just that people watch TV, and they're made to think that things are very simple and clear, because that's the way they are on TV. And everyone thinks that everything should be that way.

LJ: Do you think your relation to the poetry scene has changed? Do you feel more at ease?

I mean, as an “established” poet.

BM: In the world of the St. Mark’s Church poetry scene it’s easier to exist. Years ago when you walked into St. Mark’s Church it was like a pickup scene. I mean the difference is that now I really know how I feel about poetry, and that I really love listening to poetry. In the beginning I didn’t really know that. I mean I guess I did, but I didn’t know that I did. So it’s really great. A lot of readings that we go to, I’d prefer to be invisible and just listen to the work. I wish there was a poetry series on TV, so you could listen to poetry all day long; the social scene doesn’t really make it at all. It used to be much more fun. People used to make love in the church belfry and on the pews. You know, it was a lot of fun. What was more interesting about the sixties, that doesn’t seem to be true now, is that sex was more predominant. Unless maybe I’m just missing it. So I’m still regressive in that sense, like when I tell my kids about various types of birth control, and then I suddenly realize that they can’t make love without the fear of getting AIDS or something. I mean, and sex is totally different than it used to be. I guess a lot of people really don’t pay attention.

LJ: What do you think of monogamy?

BM: Oh, I think it sucks. Yeah, I’m against monogamy. That’s an easy one. Always have

been. But you know, people in the world don’t feel that way. Even in the sixties, people used to go around saying how great faithfulness was. And like if a couple stays together and celebrates their 50th wedding anniversary everyone thinks that’s a great thing. I think it’s a terrible thing, especially for women. I think it’s an awful thing, but nobody will admit it. It’s like a moral issue. I mean monogamy works if the woman is really content to do all the cooking and cleaning and be a housewife, and then it works. And that’s why there are all those couples who celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. I mean I can’t believe that’s what they have to do.

LJ: What about marriage?

BM: I’m against marriage. The only reason I’ll get married now is if someone needs a green card and will pay me a lot of money. Then I’ll do it.

LJ: What’s your idea of utopia?

Mayer: Well it’s all in that book. [*Utopia*, United Artists, 1984]

LJ: It seems like a lot of your early projects are about consciousness, exploring that. What did you think you were going to find out by doing that?

BM: Good question. I’ve always been interested in the brain and consciousness. I mean it’s amazing that I had a cerebral hemorrhage and now I see all these neurologists and am concerned with all those things in a different way. I think it’s great actually. I shouldn’t say that. I learned in the hospital that you’re not supposed to think a cerebral hemorrhage is interesting in any way. Otherwise you get accused of having a sense of unreality. One nurse actually said to me, “You don’t realize what happened to you.”

LJ: What do you think of the medical system?

BM: I think we should all be able to use our health insurance to see homeopaths if we want to. I think the medical system stinks. And I think doctors must take a course in medical school on how not to tell the truth and how not to answer questions. Because if you ask the doctors a question, they won’t tell you they don’t know, because that’s against the rules. A doctor is not supposed to not know something. So they just make up some phony answer which is not true. And I can’t find a neurologist who knows about dreams. I mean I finally found one in a book, but in real life never. And I guess I’ve been spoiled by seeing a psychiatrist who was a doctor, and he was a neurologist, and I was totally spoiled. I could just ask him whatever question I wanted and he would actually answer, and if he didn’t know he would say I don’t know. It’s a very simple thing to say. But the only valuable thing a neurologist has ever told me is this one guy said in medical school he was told to take PABA to remember dreams. And that works for a while.

LJ: And you’ve been having dreams again?

BM: Yeah. I have them if I take this drug called Xanax—it induces dreams—but that’s problematic because how can you take that much Xanax? And that’s the only way I can remember dreams, so one day I hope to come up with another solution.

LJ: Do you still use information from your dreams in poems? Have you been incorporating that?

BM: Yeah I can, but at the moment I don’t because I don’t have enough memory of dreams to do it. I mean it used to be an integral part of my work, but at the moment I’m writing mostly about reality. [Laughs]

LJ: When you were in the hospital, how did the doctors and nurses react to the fact that you were a poet?

BM: Oh. Amazingly. They would say to me all the time “Say something poetic.” They never used the word poetry as a noun. “Do something poetic.” And they would hover over my shoulder when I was using the computer to see what I typed. Well, those weren’t the doctors, they were the cognitive therapists.

LJ: Do you think that you figured out any-

thing about consciousness from having that experience?

BM: Oh yeah, definitely. But what I’ve mainly figured out is that really fascinating things have been happening to me for the last three years, and nobody asks me about them. Nobody seems to care. I can’t get a straight answer from anybody.

LJ: You mean like doctors?

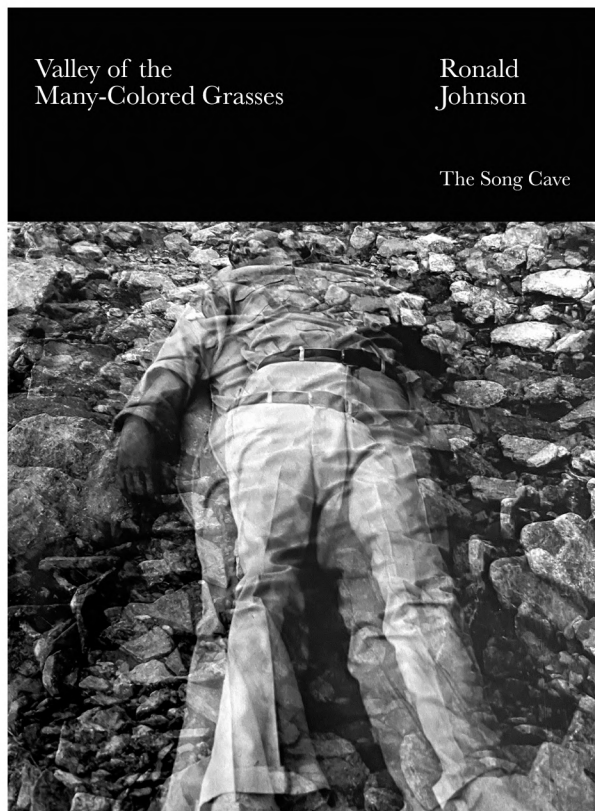
BM: Yeah. I mean they all think I’m imagining it. I saw some optometrist and I told him I couldn’t read because I was seeing weird squiggly orange and green shapes on the page, and he looked at me askance, to put it nicely, and then about six months later he said “yeah, I think probably you were right about what you said because I just read it in a book.” So it’s been very frustrating. I mean it would be great if somebody was really interested in what was happening to me, and if it continues the way it is now, I’m going to be forced to write a book about it, which I don’t think is the book I want to write. But I would love to talk about it. I mean when I first left the hospital I was desperate for someone to talk to and I really thought that was a possible thing, and somebody had told me that if you put some kind of statement or question on the Internet that you’ll find a person—that it’s inevitable, you’ll have to find a person. So I did that and the only response I got was from this doctor who said “If you can’t remember your dreams, it’s important not to forget your aspirations.” [laughs] and he signed it, Doctor So-and-So. I mean my collection of silly statements about dreams is endless. So it would be nice to know a doctor, it would be nice to know a neurologist, it would be nice to be able to ask questions and have them answered. I mean it’s tiring to be the person who has all these thoughts and they don’t go anywhere and nobody seems to care about them. I know I’m complaining.

LJ: You’re writing again. How has your writing changed?

BM: It’s changed a lot. I feel like a different person. I was thinking I should have a new name, and to start a new kind of writing. At the moment I’m writing these epigrams, and it’s amazing. I started writing epigrams because Lee Ann Brown created this game where there were a pile of form cards and a pile of content cards. And every time I would draw out a form card it would be an epigram. So I started writing all these epigrams, and then I realized that it was very easy to write them, and all I had to do was close my eyes and think about anything at all. And epigrams are an amazing form because they’re so brief. So that’s what I’m doing now. And/or writing a book about the iguana, maybe.

LJ: The iguana in the other room?

BM: Yes. Well it’s hard not to. He’s right next to my desk.



***Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses* by Ronald Johnson**

Introduction by Guy Davenport, with afterword by Peter O’Leary

“*Valley of the Many-Colored Grasses* joins Thoreau’s *Walden* and Charles Ives’s *Essays Before a Sonata* as a foundational document of an America yet to be made.” —Donald Revell

www.the-song-cave.com / www.spdbooks.org

LJ: What are the projects that you haven't done yet that you'd like to do?

BM: Uh. I'd like to get rich. You mean writing projects?

LJ: Yeah, writing projects.

BM: I don't know. Good question. While I was in the hospital I had this dream that—I mean it persisted for about a year too, and I thought it was real—that in *The Desires of Mothers To Please Others In Letters* [Hard Press, 1993], I had written a poem for each prose piece, and that if people read that, they would learn how to write poetry. So, maybe that's a project. [Laughs] I've written so many poems, they're everywhere. I don't know exactly where they are everywhere, but everywhere I look I find more poems. So, it would be nice to find all the poems.

LJ: That's a good project. What about experiments? Are there writing experiments that are still useful for you from the original experiments list?

BM: I like doing the free associative experiment, where you write whatever.

LJ: How did those experiment lists come about?

BM: We put them together in my first workshop. The workshop students and I put them together. There's a project I'd like to do, but it's not exactly a writing project. But I'd like computers to be able to record everything you think and see. To be like the brain, and to write that out. And apparently eventually computers will be able to do this. That Wim Wenders movie, *The End of the World*, is sort of like that. And somebody said to me, "who would read it?" But I'm thinking that I would read it. I would love to read it. Like if you had all these documents of everybody's experience. It would be amazing.

LJ: That's kind of like a high-tech Olson project. Scanning and mapping.

BM: And then you could just take part of it and publish it in a poetry magazine. I like taking prose works and changing them into poetry and vice versa. Well, I just want to make some money. I want to start a wildlife refuge. Those are my plans. I know exactly where to do it but I don't have the cash.

LJ: Where?

BM: In East Chatham, where we can build those wooden walkways over the pond and over the swamp, and people can walk on them and observe. We can bring the beavers back. Beavers and herons and all kinds of wildlife. So that's my aspiration. See I remembered my aspirations.

Lydia Davis

We live within sight—in the case of my family, anyway, and nearly, just around a bend in the road, in the case of Phil and Bernadette—of Snake Mountain, the reason for the village's existence. Twenty-six years ago, a mining company had the intention of leveling this mountain to extract a rock called greywacke, valuable for paving roads. The town within which our village lies did not prohibit this, and our topography was in danger of changing permanently, amid ceaseless noise, dust, and many shaken and some possibly caved-in backyard and front yard wells. So a committee was formed to effect the incorporation of a separate village within the township. The village was formed, and it prohibited commercial mining.

The village is not large—with an area of a little over three square miles and a population of about 580—and it is made up of even smaller communities, three hamlets. My family and I shared with Phil and with Bernadette, until she left us so recently and painfully, one of those hamlets, one which was itself divided into two parts. Close to the base of Snake Mountain runs a wide, winding and active creek, full and precipitous enough, in certain spots, to have driven at least one mill wheel here, in the old days. My part of the village, although it is to the southeast of Bernadette and Phil's, is called the Upper Village, because it is upstream from their part, the Lower Village, to the northwest. So the Upper Village is connected, via the creek—a few minutes' walk away from me down the road—to the Lower Village, where the creek lies across a field and through a fringe of trees from their back door. Friends and family (and surely also some of Bernadette's students) would cross the field to the bank of the creek and swim or just watch the water, which ran smooth there. (I would cross a neighbor's side yard by the church, in the Upper Village, and swim in the creek there, upstream, where it also ran smooth, close to a spot where the churchgoers used to be baptized).

Their house is a distinctive part of village history, being once the home of the rabbi, when this place was a busy summer destination for a Jewish community, when vacationers would walk up a hill and down again from the train station—now a piano repair shop; to a hotel in the Upper Village—now an empty lot; or to a boarding house next to the hotel which, when my family and I moved here, was entirely open to the elements in its upper stories and sagging toward collapse, sun-bleached clothes still hanging in an open-air closet—finally

collapsed and cleared away; and attend services in the synagogue, now a residence still standing in the Upper Village on the banks of the creek, a Star of David in its top window. Before the rabbi lived in their house, it was a church. Phil once took me, along with some other curious friends, upstairs into the attic floor to see the peaked beams in the ceiling of the old sanctuary.

Bernadette and Phil landed here in this small village by chance, my family and I landed here years later, also by chance, and for a while I did not even know they were here. Our fellow villagers probably mostly did not know anything about them, probably still don't. There has been no public recognition yet, here, of Bernadette's passing, and the loss that it means, to friends and family, and to a much wider world. Before I came to know her and Phil, here in the village, I had never met Phil and it had been many, many years since I met Bernadette, once only, briefly, inside St. Mark's Church. Once I knew they were here, it amused me that after being New York City people, we had all landed in this little New York State place, a random place, but, like any other little random place, having its own firm and unexceptional reality and history. And it even heartened and encouraged me, out here in the country, if I felt sometimes too remote from the world, that fellow writers so closely tied to my old hometown city happened to have landed within the confines of this little village—just downstream a ways.

As Bernadette was in her own manner embedded in the village, though she and Phil would leave and return, leave and return, the village, its people and its small events, her immediate neighbors, some close and kind, were often embedded in her poems, naturally appearing there as part of the fabric of her day or week, of her thoughts and musings. She was in the village, and, in her own manner, a part of it, but also quite apart from it and part of a larger world, miles away, of communities far away and also in the past. If she integrated the events and people of the village into her poems, as she had integrated other places and people wherever she was living, they appeared as seen in the light of her wider, more cosmopolitan and knowing intelligence and experience. Maybe it was because she was not only of them, but always also a little apart from them, that she could write about them with such decisiveness and clarity, such humor and wry compassion, that they stepped or walked into the poems in such a natural way, the poems admitting them with a deeply embedded conversational eloquence, a deeply inherent lyricism. And now, just as pieces, periods, and aspects of the village are memorial-

ized within her books, she is part of the history of the village, whether it knows it yet or not.

We had a pattern that continued for a while, toward the end of Bernadette's life—although at the time we had no idea that this was toward any end at all, just part of an ongoing life—in which I would bring over to their house, to pass along, some books of poetry they might not have seen, books that my long distance book club had chosen and read, and that I doubted I would ever read again, just because—how long would my own life continue? And in return—not any planned exchange, only something they had access to and that I welcomed—they would give me a half gallon of milk, raw milk from a farm, not commercially available. This went on for a while, some poetry in exchange for some milk, until the source of the milk dried up.

Around that time, before and after, there were also some mid-summer parties in their hospitable back yard, with readings, friends, family, and students in and out of the back door, excursions down to the creek, and some parties indoors in colder weather, in their very warm living room, with large plants looming near the deeply comfortable sofa. But the two last gatherings were without Bernadette—one being her wake and one not too long after that, still full of good conversation, and good food, and with a small baby and a small dog in attendance, but also with her absence lingering there, and the sorrow of it.

Midsummer Day, Redux

Elizabeth Willis

Midsummer day,

it's as if you were Bernadette, great and profligate, a ruthless matching of duration. Curiosity can be almost heartless, that's why hell has teeth. A poet doesn't choose the mouths they enter, a word is always more than this one thing even when it's a shield to defend her open heart. To cut or staunch a wound with a single word, to bring the end into view to taunt and refuse it, a moth so near the hand it's a kind of breathing, taking nothing but a piece of time and now it's gone, full stop, full sun. What has not left, how long, anyone. To be animate is not always to have preference. What's given is hardly ever free. Even ice responds to anger or to love, the window giving up a fern on the coldest day, I don't know if this is the hottest but it's getting close. Sentences always thinking in extremes, the begin-

ning and the end, the top ten, it's almost ministerial to be so obsessed with winning.

This is where it turns, Bernadette, we're all just trying to make it last between the zero and the one. I strike a match against the safety strip in your old kitchen on E 4th. Diamonds on the stove, the implausible luck of marketing, hunger for actual food only sharpens it. I look up the word for solstice, it's like a knife but it's not there and no one's at the door when I go outside. Invitation is the oldest form of transfer. Feeling powerless doesn't mean we're stuck, I wanted to ask you about constraints. The power of rent control and love oh fearless love.

How did Greek become a metaphor when it's phosphorous politics in the air all the time. Not a lack of understanding but the edge of wordlessness, the unpronounceable lake you swim in they say is bottomless, that's a myth too. Classification can resemble bondage or a

fence that brings your freedom into view. You kissed me at the door, a formal field is not a meadow, Phil was working for the Times which sounded so romantic. When someone asks me what I do I still don't know what to say. Trees can feel more than anyone expected, skin is the largest part of consciousness. The bees are quiet in the heat, you don't want music in the end, sometimes it's almost too much to breathe. I'll try anything if something in me other than my brain says yes. Don't mistake vitality for ignorance or discretion for constraint, astonishment in small things, that's like something you once told me, with the nerves of a prizefighter, which doesn't make it easier to live.

“here there's no buds on the trees yet but somewhere there are.”

Bianca Rae Messinger

Last Friday in Buffalo we all gathered to celebrate Bernadette, Lee Ann Brown sang Bernadette's rendition of “Amazing Grace,” Joey Yearous-Algozin read from the society of February 25th, Tyrone Williams read from “Ice Cube Epigrams.” Bernadette reminds us that remembering is always a form of moving, and a form to be shared with friends. She reminds us that addition is always better than subtraction, writing over what is written not as a sense of covering up but in adding to, “on the notes side of things” writing over the canon, through the canon, against the canon, but always on the side of movement against codification. Bernadette teaches us that sending letters to your friends is a form of remember-

ing—as a form of tracking memory and creating writing that feels memory, that “moves” like memory, “my sheer insistence on the past has made me the genius of the tight palms.” (“I Imagine Things”). Our waking memory is a terrible resource for remembering things, but we can make it better. Bernadette pushed it as far as possible, as far as language could hold.

I remember talking to Bernadette in Iowa, itself a kind of impossible feat made possible by Elizabeth Willis, drinking red wine in solo cups talking about translation. At some point she lets it out, that translation is like a sex change. We get more wine. I asked her about this later in a letter—to which she replied, “I don't remember saying it but, yes, translation is a sex change. I'll go for that. You should track down my work *Memory*, which I made

long ago when I was a conceptual artist, you might find it on the internet.” There's something unsettling here but maybe not for the reasons I thought when I first heard it. Perhaps because what Bernadette's work does is go to the center of what writing is, writing “is” changing sex—changing sex into the writing of the poem. Maybe there is little difference here between writing and translation because both require the need to change “sex.” Bernadette understood this perhaps better than anyone, except maybe Catullus.

Be Strong Bernadette: On *Memory*

Shiv Kotecha

About halfway into Bernadette Mayer’s *Memory*—the book that resulted from the month-long photography and diary project she conducted in July 1971, for which, each day, she shot one roll of 35-millimeter slide film, recounted her day from memory onto tape, and kept a journal cataloging her thoughts and feelings as she looked back at the 1,116 photos she was producing over the course of the month—Mayer starts to lose her bearings. She panics: the photos she took during the first week of the experiment—

- of “the main thing ... a white sink” with which her entry for July 1 begins;
- of her boyfriend Ed Bowes, the filmmaker, and his long hair;
- of a sign that reads “The Opportunity Shop”;
- of herself, in red, playing pool;
- of the sky before and after the sun disappears;
- of wet clothes drying;
- of another photograph of a piano;
- of darkness

—have just arrived from their developer in fresh stacks, ready for her to “recreate ... reargue reascend reassemble ... reassert ... reassess reassign reassimilate ... reassume ... reattach ... reattack reattempt reawaken rebind rebloom ... reboil rebuild & ... rebury” the *past perfect* they contain into the project’s present. Until this point, Mayer has been able to write, and take pictures, and record herself talking about the day’s events with the suspension of disbelief that, in a later interview, she attributes to “good scientists,”¹ who are not “prepared to recognize anything and just wait to see what happens.” However, the arrival of these photographs inaugurates a host of new concerns—

- such as the concept of prediction, as she writes on July 16, when she says, “the concept of prediction”;
- and the inability to correctly report what she sees in the photos, writing on July 20 about the difference between “the relation of conceived time to intuited time ... what’d I say baby what’d I see? & when you see that will you laugh at me”;
- and her fear that she won’t be able to keep up, that she might already be working on a project of failure; note the “fear” encountered at the end of July 25, which punctuates the rest of the book like an irregular heartbeat;
- as on July 26: “already started the fear to finish memory”;
- or July 29: “that fear has to do with communication & as a finish to memory I learn one thing, that the fear’s already started”;
- or July 29 again: “am I giving up or just beginning to have the fear to see it right”

—all of which characterize the feedback loop remembering imposes on writing, a loop that overwhelms Mayer, bringing her at once too close and too far from the just-past. The panic makes Mayer want to give up. She looks at the pictures, hoping to see what they cannot remember. And it changes her language: “Had I quit yet?” asks Mayer at the start and again at the end of July 17; then again, “nobody notices but I quit,” on July

22. Her addled psychic state at this point of her “emotional science project” is not my interpretation, but what Mayer herself repeatedly describes feeling in the latter half of the book (“I get worse & worse,” June 24; “I’m going crazy,” June 29); as well as in *Studying Hunger*, the book she writes just after it (“a subsequent emotional catching up”); and in later interviews (“I had a total breakdown,” *Artforum*, 2020).

Reading the latter half of *Memory*, one gets an acute sense of Mayer’s panic, and of the trap of looking to document what she sees for the remainder of the month. However, one also learns to understand the ways Mayer extinguishes her panic, and the potentially dire consequences of pausing in the middle of a project about looking to evaluate it in the present. She returns to her pictures not as a reflection on an in-progress work of art, but as something to be objectively described. As she reflects later, in a July 1989 workshop at Naropa:

I was never trying to take beautiful photographs necessarily, I was always trying to ... take photographs in the sense of what you’re really seeing, you know, not trying to isolate objects and say, put them in the center of the frame, you know, and say, “here’s a beautiful Styrofoam cup,” you know, surrounded by grass (that would be fun!) but to just to take them just to reflect what actual vision is, you know, and not, not romanticize, you know, it or certainly not the writing either but not romanticize the visual ... that’s more than you could note in a moment, you know, if you were sitting with a notebook ... you don’t always see all these things when you’re looking with your eyes.²

...

In the months preceding July 1971, Mayer, who had left New York to live and write in seclusion in a house she rented in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, ran out of money and returned to New York, where she began teaching workshops at the Poetry Project. One night, ended up at a dinner party with “gold-plated silverware” hosted by Holly Solomon, the art dealer and patron who was known to foot the bill to support adventurous, boundary-pushing art projects larger institutions ignored, such as *Splitting* (1974), the New Jersey residence that Gordon Matta-Clark severed with a literal handsaw. Mayer approached Solomon with the idea to produce her time-constrained installation on memory’s flux, which Solomon funded and exhibited at her SoHo Gallery at 98 Greene Street in February 1972.

In Solomon’s gallery, the photographs comprising *Memory* were installed in a tight grid format with each day’s 36 exposures lined horizontally, so that you might move like a carriage across a typewriter’s page, from one side of the gallery to the other, to see, or “read,” any one day of July’s thirty-one, then return to the other side of the room to start the next. The thick strip of visuals was installed flush with the ground floor (“like a child,” remembered Mayer), measuring 4 feet high and 36 feet across. Speaking to *The World*, Mayer recalls how the psychology and neurology books she was reading at the time of the installation led to her arrangement of the photographs, which replicate the oxymoronic and ouroboros-like panic of information and distance Mayer herself describes feeling during the month of their production:

[I wanted] to make the pictures as long as the wall space as I

possibly could. They were chronological, but when you peripherally associated to one picture you were far away from space in time (except horizontally) as you could be, like memory.

Since their initial showing, the visual and textual components of *Memory* have been installed, archived, enlarged, abbreviated, digitized, and revived in various formats. In 1972, Mayer hung the photos in her loft on Grand Street for friends or strangers to view by appointment. At around the same time, she prepared an abridged version of the project—with a selection of the photos displayed inside a three-ring binder and titled *Remembering*—to be included as part of the writer and curator Lucy Lippard’s landmark exhibition of works by female conceptual artists, *c. 7,500*, which traveled to various institutions in the US and the UK between 1973–1974.³ It wasn’t until 1975 that North Atlantic Press published the text of *Memory*—which Mayer would add and revise substantially after the exhibition—in the form of a book, printed in an unknown run, and including only a select few images, reproduced as a monochrome cut-up, and used as the book’s cover. Thus, *Memory* dispersed itself, remaining out of circulation until 2002, when the poet and scholar Craig Dworkin made scans of *Memory*’s 1975 edition, along with a retyped “reading version” of the text, available as a PDF through the *Eclipse* archive. The photos from the original exhibition were not seen publicly until 2016, when the Poetry Foundation in Chicago restaged the show with slightly larger reprints of each photo, alongside iPads and headphones with which visitors could listen to Mayer’s six-hour narration. The show returned to New York’s CANADA Gallery in 2017, where all of Mayer’s original prints were displayed in a strip that ran at eye-level, alongside the amplified recording.

It was not until 2020, on Siglio Press’s reprinting of *Memory*, that Mayer’s 1975 text and the swath of color photographs taken five years prior—

- of upstate diners;
- of East Village bedroom windows;
- of snoozing boyfriends;
- of grass;
- of cheeseburgers;
- of reflections;
- and of fireworks

—would appear, for the first time, together. Here, some of the images appear as double spreads and as full-page bleeds next to the text, so the “noisy technicolor” texture of any isolated “pretty picture of memory” may be read alongside Mayer’s description of what she herself saw, days after she pulled her eye away from the viewfinder to take it. “Sometimes memory is just noise,” she writes, literalizing what she’s looking at, and without fear, trying to communicate. Others appear in tables of nine, approximating the grid installation, and moreover, to better capture the slight movements of Mayer’s hand, directed by her mind’s eye, that would determine what went into one picture, and how long she may have waited before snapping the next, as on July 30—

- where Mayer looks up to shoot a lamp;
- then, her shadowy face under its flare;
- then another lamp, from far;
- and from below;
- then, having turned 90 degrees, again the lamp;

— then turning again but with the shutter held down, so that the one lamp above, in the image, becomes two lamps and the trace of a poet, turning, beneath them.

Pages of Mayer’s written text punctuate the photographs, to approximate the disorientation of the senses that her original pairing of image with spoken text occasioned (“I can hear it in my head as you begin to repeat... let’s go back to that tree”).

...

There’s a beautiful moment at the end of a 1974 interview published in *The World*, in which Mayer rebuffs Dick Miller who has just described how reading a “successful piece of writing,” regardless of its form “causes the mind to think.” Her retort is: “It’s almost impossible ... for [writing on the page] to cause the mind to think.” This moment appears toward the end of their conversation, after Mayer has already spoken at length about her then three published manuscripts (*Ceremony Latin*, *Story*, and *Moving*); on editing the short-lived mimeograph magazine *0 to 9* with Vito Acconci; on the function that teaching workshops at the Project has in relation to her practice (“Every function”); on the difference between bad scientists (“who adapt language to make it mean something it doesn’t mean”) and good ones (“who can suspend their disbelief and not be prepared to recognize anything and just wait and see what happens”); on what Miller keeps referring to as “success” or possible failure of her projects (“No. I don’t think there are any failures in that sense in relation to my work for myself”); and on *Memory*. It’s this last project Mayer then refers to in her response to Miller’s aside about the metaphysical effects that printed pages have on his mind, as if to further clarify the relational complex—too far, too close—that he may have felt while reading her writing:

[It’s] mainly concerned with the possibility of a total symbiosis: to really push people into a corner where we’d meet. And to see what would happen [sic] with that. And in fact that has worked. And that has worked in such a terrifying way that I’m almost afraid to continue doing it.

Mayer said that she “did Memory” to see if writing and remembering, which Gertrude Stein claimed could not be simultaneous, “could be done or in what their failure would consist”—the language, or poetry, that is produced when the physical instantiations of memory are leveraged against its psychical mechanism. When, in other words, the “impossible project” of “real remembering” becomes an occasion, not for a sanctimonious lyricizing of the past, but an opportunity to include fear, and panic, and doubt, and the profusion of more impossible-to-answer-correctly questions; self-reflexively writing through memory’s ricochet, to eke herself out of the feedback loop of “fear” that the future of “remembering” will always threaten.

Notes

1. Bernadette Mayer, interview by Barry Alpert and Dick Miller, *The World*, 29 (1974).

2. www.allenginsberg.org/2022/05/may-12

3. In a lecture given at Naropa, Mayer recounts the publishing opportunities that were made available for *Memory* at the time: “Praeger publishers said that they wanted to publish [Memory] as a book with all the photographs in it. And I said, ‘Amazing’, you know, ‘what a great thing’. And this agent for them said, ‘Can I come to your house and discuss this with you?’, and I said ‘Fine’. And he came, and he said, ‘If you’ll make love with me, I’ll get the book published!’”

World of Yum-Yum: On *Studying Hunger*

Matthew Rana

On September 22, 1972, the American poet Bernadette Mayer wrote the following inside her psychoanalysis journal: “Jacques (Lacan) has wise words 4 me, it’s 2 good to B true, you’re 2 good to B’dette.” Nestled inside this parody of Lacanian algebra, there is, I think, a kernel of wisdom whose truth lies in its very improbability. Because there is a sense in which the poet’s statement seems to radically condense the French psychoanalyst’s ideas surrounding what he called the “barred Other” or the constitutive lack within the symbolic order. “I always speak the truth,” he claims in *Television*, “Not the whole truth, because there’s no way to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real.”

To a poet preoccupied with the question of whether “to leave all out to include all,” as she puts it in the coda to her month-long experiment in self-documentation *Memory*, these words or similar would have seemed wise, indeed.¹ For one of the contradictory claims of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that it is precisely because of what is left out of language, what it cannot say, that we begin to speak at all. Put differently, it is in the structural incompleteness of language itself, its failure to say or symbolize everything, that the speaking being emerges—not as an organic whole, but as internally cut off and divided from itself. As in the moniker “B’dette,” there is something crucial missing, something coextensive yet non-identical that cleaves the subject of language not into two, but into a one that is paradoxically both less than and more than itself.

This something—the not-all that both enables signification and disrupts it—is arguably the center around which Mayer’s *Studying Hunger*, a book-length prose poem based on the notebooks that she kept while in analysis, revolves. An avid reader of Freud and psychoanalytic theory in general (poems such as “The Sexual Etiology of the Child” and “Ferenczi”² indicate the breadth of her reading), Mayer began her study in April, 1972—about five years before Lacan’s work would become widely available in English.³ As she writes in the book’s opening paragraphs, “I wanted to try to record, like a diary, in writing, states of consciousness, my states of consciousness, as fully as I could,” using a “workable code, or shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition” of her mind. Mayer shared the notebooks with her “psychiatrist” David Rubinfine (tellingly styled as Belial, an Old Testament demon, in the unabridged 2011 edition *Studying Hunger Journals*), a former neurologist with highly unorthodox methods, as part of her treatment.⁴ Not surprisingly, much of the book is spent recounting dreams—another one of the author’s main preoccupations—including one in which she has sex with the famous Freudian case study in obsessional neurosis, the so-called Rat Man. But unlike, say, *Tribute to Freud*, H.D.’s mythopoetic account of her time on the couch at Berggasse, Mayer’s dense blocks of associative and loosely punctuated prose offer little in the way of personal discovery or intimate revelation. On the contrary, they are marked by a certain opacity. Despite torrents of words and the author’s freewheeling use of the second-person, there is something in the poem that resists us; more than proper names, something crucial is being withheld. “Please believe me, there are things you cannot write,” she confides.

Even her musings on sex and womanhood are interrogative, as though giving form to the (unanswerable) question around which, according to Lacan, the clinical structure of hysteria turns: What is a woman? Or, in Mayer’s formulation: “Is this a woman writing? Is this person a woman? Is this woman elated? Is this a woman’s elation?” Pressing Lacan on the matter of sexual difference, she writes: “Send penis quick direct to mind where sex can annihilate instinct,” a reference to the “phallus,” the notorious master-signifier of castration which also plays a key role in the psychoanalyst’s notion of sex as a symbolic position (and not a biological or instinctual given). Nevertheless, the poet is circumspect: “If the penis, Lacan, existed only in the mind, then it would be possible for even the most simple-minded insect (*trouvée*) to find your thought and enlarge on it horribly.” Even the phallus, it stands to reason, must in some way hold on to the real.

Although such questioning of sex may seem a psychoanalytic commonplace, its persistence in *Studying Hunger* is significant for the way it suggests what cannot manifest in consciousness. Put differently, it gestures towards precisely what is left out of the author’s attempt to include all, not as an element that is repressed, but rather, as an element whose absence is necessary to her code’s functioning, yet which also disturbs it and makes it unworkable. Mayer touches on this towards the end of the 1975 edition in a missive to the author of *Écrits*:

Dear Dr. Lacan, The penultimate distance between myself and you (if you were sitting on the peacock (that is, where it is presently placed in the room) and I myself and I were all-in-one like a cat half-dancing on the absent you (I mean rug) (sic) would ____ be large enough (how can I describe it all in two dimensions?) so that my gaping yawn (*cette béance lettriste* (note: why does she assume, without full knowledge that the *béance* is feminine? See Proust’s roosters)) and the dawning sigh that such an opening evokes, reverentially towards all human presence, could not be heard by you and yours? AUDIT, AUD, IBLE, = AUDITABLE.

In French, *béance* is both a literary term meaning wide gap (or gape) and a scientific term for the opening of the larynx. In Lacanian parlance, it stands for the gap that emerges in place of the missing signifier whose presence would complete the signifying order, thus making it possible to “say it all.” Put more simply, the *béance* marks the limit of symbolization. By assuming that this limit is feminine, Mayer is suggesting that sexuality and sexual difference too occupy this limit. But in the manner of an inaudible sigh or the rift between syllables in the word “AUDIT.” Pronounced individually, they form a nonsensical French phrase, *au dit*, which to Lacan’s ears might have registered (if at all) as “to the said.” Something in the direction of or tending toward what is said, but which is in itself unspoken. Echoing what is perhaps the psychoanalyst’s most infamous claim, the relation here is one of non-relation or, following Mayer, of “penultimate distance.” For, at the same time, that words become “auditable” or accountable at all depends upon this “dawning” gap that sets the signifying chain in motion. To speak of sex, then, is to speak of nothing other than this fundamental contradiction in language. In any case, this is what I think Mayer wants us to consider.

Remarkably, this sex is not the only break in the symbolic that *Studying Hunger* confronts us with. The problem of hunger

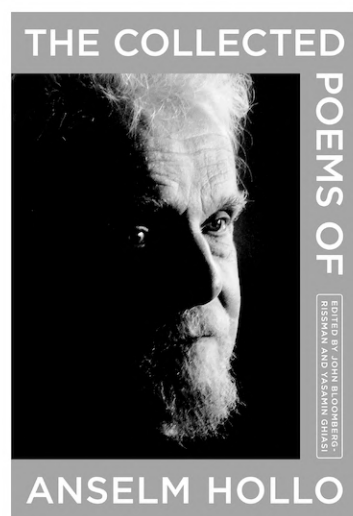
(that great metaphor for desire) also has a privileged relationship to the real in psychoanalytic thought. Take, for example, Melanie Klein's object-relations theory, in which the maternal breast becomes the primordial object to which all aspects of mental life are bound—irrespective of whether we were breast-fed. Mayer poses the problem in a slightly different register in Book III of the *Journals*: “how to get rid of milk, the proof of all ache of all love is the start of the crime.” In Lacanian theory, hunger—or, “the world of yum-yum” as he called it—takes a similar turn. According to this account, because the infant's need for nourishment is satisfied by another on whom it depends, its cries for food take on the added significance of demanding the Other's love. This demand thus acquires the dual function of articulating a need that is both real and symbolic; since the latter can never be satisfied, or, more precisely, since it gives rise to a satisfaction in excess of the biological need for food, its demand (for more satisfaction) eventually eclipses that of the former and is inscribed in the unconscious as the oral drive. For this reason, the “pleasure of the mouth,” to use Lacan's phrase, derives from neither food nor drink, nor memories of the primary relation with the caregiver, but from repeating the cry for the absent object, what he calls the unattainable *object a*, or the object cause of desire.

Lacan calls the *object a* of the oral drive “the breast.” Importantly, however, the *object a* is not a property of the subject, but a property of the object; it is the point of lack in the Other that evades us, and in doing so incites our desire. Just as the *object a* in the visual field, “the gaze,” looks blindly at us from a place we cannot see, “the breast” feeds on us while we grope for it in vain. What we “hunger” for is, therefore, not food per se, but the enjoyment of being eaten—in Lacan's words, “getting sucked.”

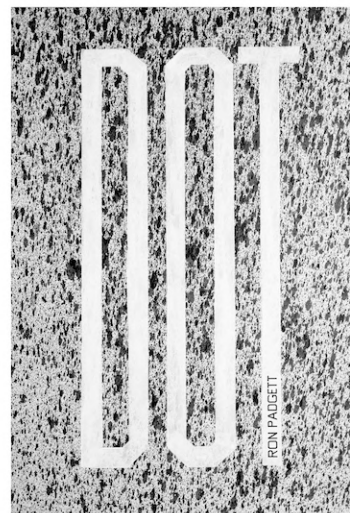
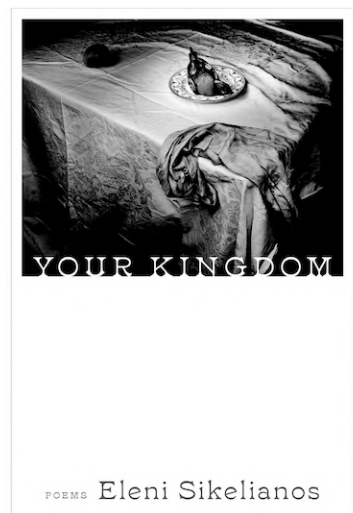
Mayer describes a similar dynamic in a line repeated throughout the *Journals*, “my hunger creates a food that everybody needs.” Here, hunger produces its own satisfaction, providing readers with what she refers to elsewhere in the book as “real food... food to sustain you, not eat.”⁵ There is certainly a kind of satisfaction to be found in reading *Hunger*—the *Journals* too, all 457 pages of them—but there is also a kind of pleasure. We feed on the author's hunger at the same time as we are consumed by it. Because in holding on to the real (of sex, of “the breast”), Mayer's writing sustains our experience of the impossibility at the very heart of language. In her work, we repeatedly encounter what causes words to fail. And this is why, I think, Mayer's writing excites—why it gets us off, so to speak: it coincides with our own unconscious desire. At least, it gives us, as readers, the opportunity to embrace our position as unconsciously desiring subjects. Perhaps this also explains why much of Mayer's writing from the period, from *Memory* to *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, is often deemed difficult or inaccessible: insofar as we, as speaking beings, are internally divided and cut off from ourselves, our desire remains inscrutable; we can never say everything about it. This confrontation with the real is also, to an extent, traumatic: it impinges on our words and disturbs our sense of self and of the social. Yet, in doing so, it also opens up nothing short of possibility—for new ways of speaking and being, new articulations of desire. Such possibility needs to be tirelessly maintained, however. As Joan Copjec, a thinker whose work informed my reflections in this essay, puts it, “we must not stop writing the impossibility of the real, the impossibility of ‘saying it all.’”⁶ I cannot think of a more Mayerian project.

Notes

1. As Mayer puts it in *Midwinter Day*: “How preoccupying / Is the wish to include all or to leave all out / Some say either wish is against a poem or art / I'm asking / Is it an insane wish?”
2. A reference to the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933), whose theory of “thalassal regression” held that coitus aims to return not only to the maternal womb, but also to aquatic life.
3. Alan Sheridan's translations of *Écrits* and *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts in Psychoanalysis* were both published in 1977 by W.W. Norton & Co.
4. According to Mayer: “[David] saw me for free... [we] had a sexual dalliance, but then we started just to ‘work.’” She adds: “[He] didn't act formally like a psychiatrist at all, we had picnics together, sitting in the grass eating caviar, drinking wine. he also took me to the cemetery to see my parent's graves. we also went to one of the landmarks in my analysis, a german restaurant named neiderstein's where we talked & drank martinis.”
5. Similar ideas are echoed in other poems from the period, such as “I Am Your Food I Am Your Fate,” a tongue-in-cheek ode to domesticity in which the lines “I always mean to say one thing when I mean two” and “we begin to say one thing and we wind up saying two,” anchor a sequence of rhyming quatrains that seem to undermine the myth of sexual complementarity that is central to heteronormative coupling. (*Milkweed Smithereens*, 33)
6. Joan Copjec, ‘Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety,’ in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 136.



WAKE UP WITH POETRY

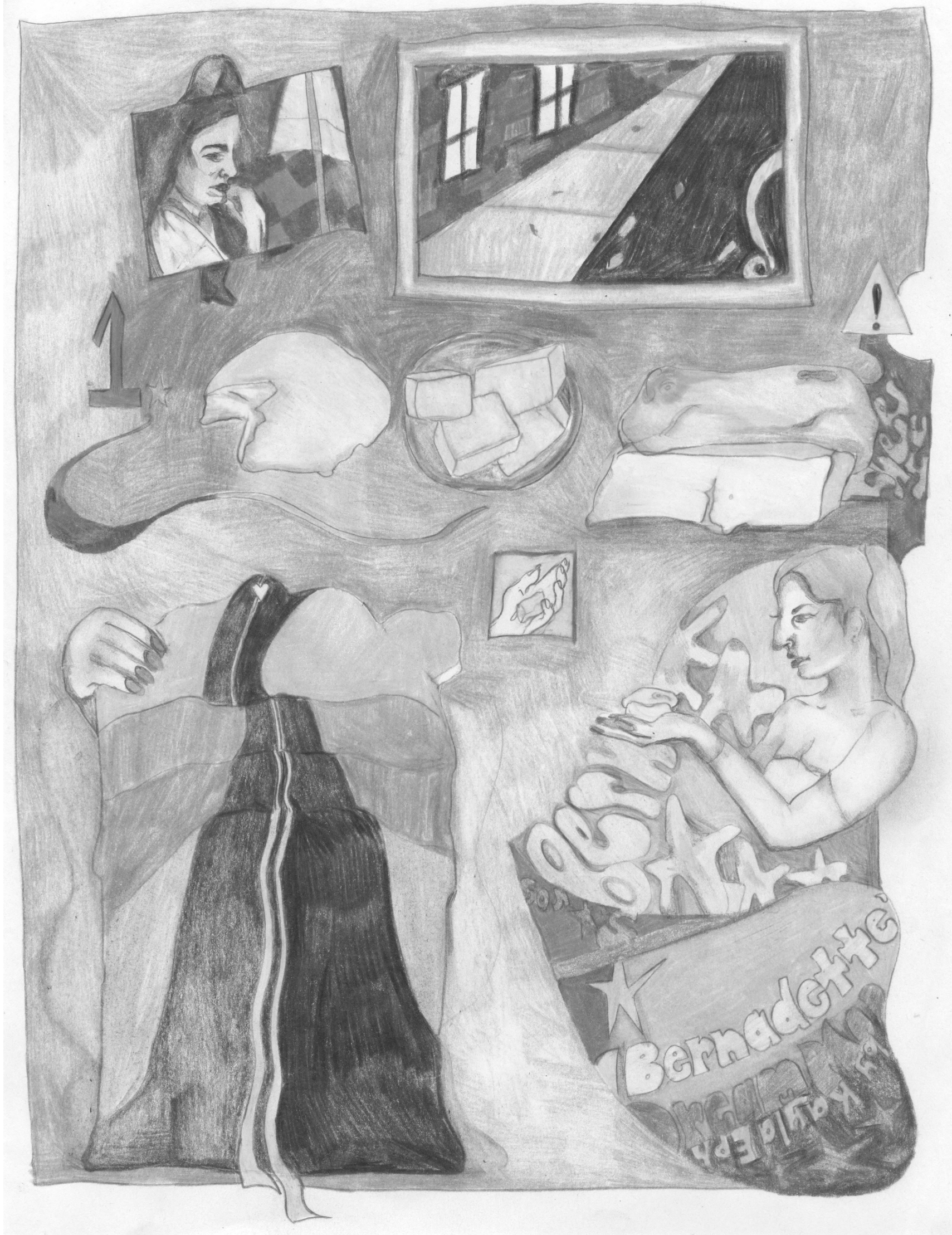


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to kayla

walking around to see what i can find
 it's a dream but it's also an earth-place
 first there is this soft cheese, it's in rectangles
 & on top of it you ~~put~~ put a special kind of meat that
 looks like the cheese but weighs more, you get it in the dream too
 you have to be careful not to tear the cheese with the
 weight of the meat. in the dream a woman puts the meat on the cheese
 & this will be your meal. the meat & cheese are street food.
 or maybe we'll call them dream-food. in another corner are the
 thrift shops. flying from the walls(dream-walls) are
 torn pieces of fabric & under them are the thrift things.
 there's shelves; on one are nebbishes, another shelf of
 popovers. this is all sort of the lower east side, no,
 the east village, the lower east side's the older part.
 two aisles lead somewhere - in the right aisle the bartender
 give me a glass of vodka it may even be mixed ^{with} ~~the~~ grapefruit & lemon
 soda. we don't actually eat or drink in the dream,
 we just get to be about to, we take huge steps, especially on ~~66~~
 66th avenue so we can go faster, but why do we want to go faster of
 sixth avenue? maybe it has something to do with sex.
 i don't think fast sex has anything to do with dreams.
 maybe on sixth avenue you have sex very slowly. once
 in a thrift shop i bought a shirt for one of my kinds,
 i'm not sure which one. on the collar it said "look
 up at the sky". on sixth avenue, the way i walk, i leap
 like a lemur.

dreamily, bernadette



Bernadette's Dream Map 1, by Kayla Ephros. Colored pencil on paper, 8.5" x 11".

Elena Gomez

from her interest in the Antarctic explorers' midwinter feasts. Mayer's method of recounting her dreams and digressive thoughts throughout the day sits alongside the poem's insistence on locating itself spatiotemporally: in the home, grocery stores, Lenox the city, and even the 1970s oil crisis and Iranian Revolution, extending her local existence into the larger world and highlighting its global social and economic relations. *Midwinter Day* asks to be read as a poem about the contradictions and crises of capitalist accumulation; Mayer's focus on the surplus production of resources, including food and energy, and produce a keen sense of a society sharply defined by hunger, which links together Mayer's family, poor in a wealthy place, with large parts of the earth's population. The poem's attention to food and the 1970s oil crisis—its descriptions of meals, food preparation, grocery shopping, and recurring motifs and images of the unrest in Iran—together connect the intimate scale of Mayer's family to the scale of resource extraction and global supply; the poem assumes the role of the cognitive and linguistic instrument that, constrained in time, can capture and activate the linkages of space.

In *Midwinter Day*, Mayer often thinks about her own writing practice, she worries, she allows thoughts to interrupt her physical tasks, from putting her children to sleep to choosing a beer to drink. Her reflections often lead us to food. When Mayer asks, "Wouldn't it be possible / To eat everything," she is also in part commenting on the method of poetic inquiry

Food in *Midwinter Day* orients social gatherings, and provides a pivot-point for thought. But note that whenever Mayer is thinking, she almost always immediately troubles the thought. Food goes from being rich in familial love and ritual to “a large flat dull dry cake like awful life,” and we are warned against “bereft dream cakes ... dry and without salt and fat preserving life.” It’s as bad as communion bread. That is, food is love and desire, but food can also bring abjection. Of course, it is also unavoidable, particularly when you are recording every component of a lived day, and when you have small children to feed. Food in the second section interacts with Mayer’s playful voice, thinking aloud as it leads the poem through Mayer’s care responsibilities. “Divided in the light a length of day is measured

all they would talk about was food because they were so hungry. They would vote on whose idea for something to eat sounded best ... One of the winning foods was roasted meat wrapped in bacon and baked in a pastry

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crust. It must've been Shackleton's because Frank Wild invented a sauce for it that became known as Wild Sauce, but I can't remember what was in it, maybe it was something sweet. They would dream about food all the time, they would dream the waiters couldn't hear them shout their orders or when the food came it was suddenly ashes.

Not long after this somber reflection on starving, freezing explorers fantasizing about food, Sophia appears and "eats lunch playfully," and then we are back to the sauce. Mayer brings food from the domestic reproductive task of feeding back into the world constructed by a person-poet:

I love chopping vegetables where you do something to make something that is one idiosyncratic thing into many things all looking the same or identical, much like the vegetables' original seeds. How rapt attention is to doing this as if it were a story.

The final sentence in this passage dissolves its syntax, bringing into focus those Mayerian turns and contrasts that come about whenever the concrete world in front of the poet begins to slip below consciousness. For Mayer, the Antarctic explorers become an exotic, dramatic story about hunger for her to hook into, an entry to her own relationship to food and feeding. The midwinter feast with Wild Sauce in harrowing conditions is placed before freshly chopped domestic vegetable sauce in her home kitchen. Mayer wants to make this link through the specific order of juxtaposition. Elsewhere in the poem, Mayer begins with the local and expands into global but here, her obsession with the eating habits of explorers on the other end of the earth eventually returns her to the home, where after lengthy and constant preparation, food is "all eaten too quickly." The association gives us one of the poem's most interesting meditations on different ways to be hungry in the world, and

different relationships to food production and consumption.

"death is food to remember history to tell"

In the evening, the fifth section of *Midwinter Day*, Mayer lists an offset single stanza "on love," which includes "oil-price increases," "An exploding oil depot in Rhodesia," "Mexican oil," "oil-burner-service technicians," "price rises, a recession," "New Federal oil-industry regulations," "the gasoline tax plan," and extremely tellingly: "Frauds, bombed buildings, the crisis in Iran." Reports of finances, murders, births, corrections, and the like situate the references to the collapses in oil and finance that newspapers on that day would have reported. The multiscalar movement of the poem becomes clear once again in this section, which employs the structure of the list as well as the "topic" of love, a form that appears within the larger temporal constraint of the single day. When Mayer writes about love here, she's writing about the world; specifically, she composed this section from documenting stories from the newspaper that day. Oil reappears here, continuing a thread that began in the opening pages of the poem, where, "the road was so slippery from a truck's oil spill." Later, "Library hours will be curtailed due to fuel prices / I feel the library should be colder and open longer hours / But I would rather see the downfall of the Shah," bringing us from Lenox back towards the world in crisis, the global scale to which Mayer keeps turning back. Two pages later, "Men who invidiously wish to be like / The unspeakable Shah of Iran / In their dealings with the world" and in another Mayerian turn, in the final section, she asks Lewis for matches, but he has eaten them "Like a hungry Iranian demonstrator on the Tehran streets / Shouting 'Death to the Shah!'" Here food and oil converge in crisis. The demon-

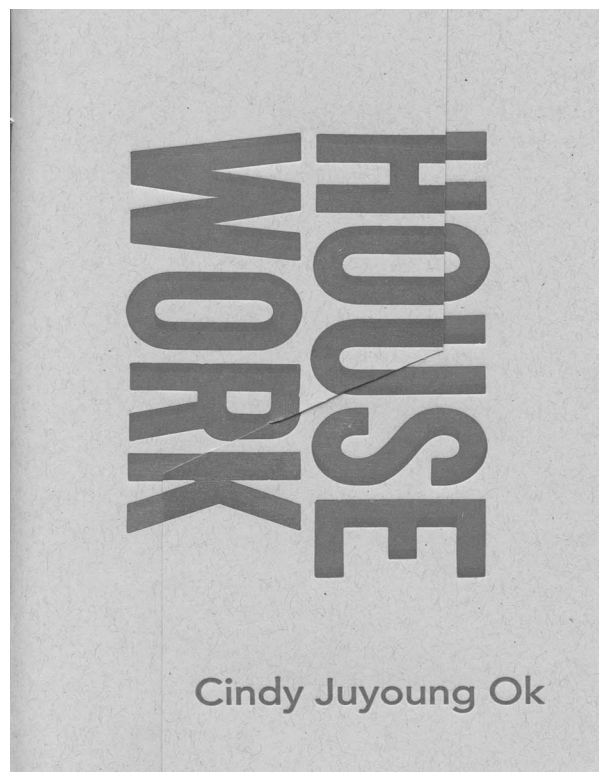
strator's hunger, mentioned in passing, is almost a lightning bolt back to Mayer's recurring attention to hunger and consumption.

If one purpose of *Midwinter Day* is to draw out connections, as tangled as they are, between the local and the global, Mayer's focus on food is not only a register of domestic care; it becomes polyphonic. Hunger is a human condition, felt by angry street demonstrators in Tehran and North American toddlers, or even for Mayer herself, breaking the dull cake into pieces in her "adolescent plate." *Midwinter Day* doesn't paper over these differences but allows the juxtapositions to generate meaning, bringing the conditions of these disparate lives into comparison by placing them alongside each other. Mayer shows us a world on multiple scales, with linkages that reveal common suffering but also multiple divergences. It's a political position that emerges from among the seemingly digressive thoughts and recorded experiences of Mayer's life on this day. And it somehow emerges in this political way despite Mayer refraining from overt polemic style. Instead, attention itself becomes a mode of political thinking: Mayer is as fastidiously observant of the inner thought process of being-in-world as she is to the materials that make up a world on different scales: from dreams, thoughts, parenting, prepared food to streets in the town, shopping malls, historical Antarctic explorers, unstable fuel prices, and world tragedy (the massacre in Jonestown occurred barely a month before Mayer composed *Midwinter Day*, and is referenced more than once in the poem). When Mayer returns to food and oil, she is teasing out the ongoing process of subsistence, of the production and reproduction of life and the resources to sustain it. The structure of the poem, its finite time—that single, shortest day of the year—emphasizes that these requirements of subsistence are inseparable from resources and political crisis. *Midwinter Day* builds these connections to move fluidly be-

tween Mayer's corporeal subjectivity and the world crises of capitalism, and to make a larger claim for the life lived within those ambivalences: that it's within these details we may find ingredients for a new kind of life.

Notes

1. allenginsberg.org/2021/12/t-d-21 and youtube.com/watch?v=Utg1jqMoflw
2. Kay Gabriel and Jo Barchi, 'But Everything's Outside', 15 July 2021, *Post45*.
3. Thank you to Sophia Dahlin and the Generative Poetry Workshop group for bringing the mystery of this line to my attention.



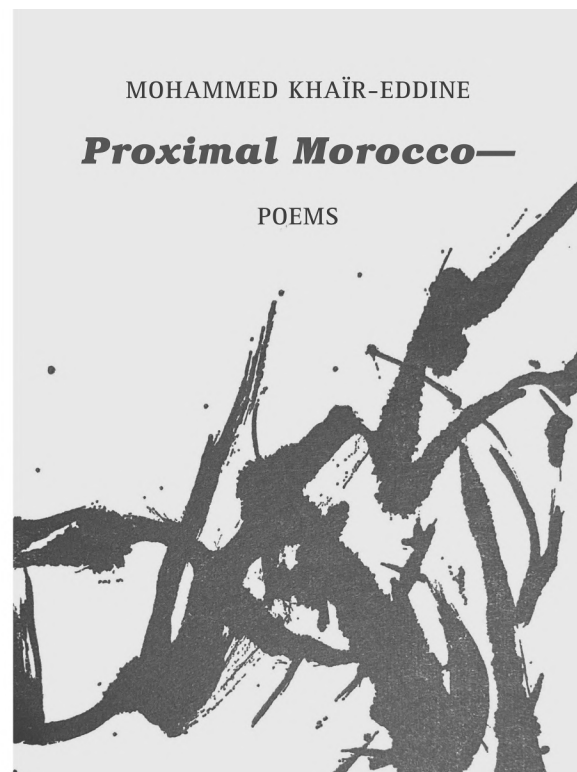
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—Emma Ramadan



Always Inviting: On Bernadette Mayer's *UTOPIA*

Marcella Durand

My copy of *UTOPIA* holds a folded letter from Bernadette Mayer. It is typed on yellow paper and she mailed it after my child Ismael arrived. She begins, “congratulations on INTRODUCTION TO CHILD-PROOFING. ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about anything to do with children is it doesn't last long.” She hopes to meet Ismael in person and please, come and visit this summer. And here is a copy of *UTOPIA*, “which I published myself so it could always be free, as any utopia should.”

I had desired *UTOPIA* ever since I heard Brenda Coultas read out the lines, “If a person wanted to be carried about the city I would be happy to do it with 2 or 3 strong friends.” (“My UTOPIA for the sick & dying,” Anne Waldman, 29). Around the same time I heard Brenda read these lines, I visited “Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World” at the New York Public Library. The exhibition included an early version of the Declaration of Independence with an anti-slavery passage crossed out (with what I prefer to remember as a shaky hand), Russian Futurist posters, and various plans for ethereal, often unbuildable cities and monuments. One such piece was pre-revolutionary architect Etienne-Louis Boullée's proposed reconstruction of the Bibliothèque du Roi, with rows of books endless and uncontainable, fading into an arch of light at the vanishing point.

Much as I loved the exhibition, the idea of Utopia it presented was immense and remote, comprised of paradises that could exist if we just built pristinely and properly enough in what seemed hues of crystal circles emanating outward from angel wings. In cold-water contrast, *UTOPIA*'s vision of being carried about the city—by friends, *strong* ones—was so earthy and attainable that I clicked. I clicked with Brenda's *The Bowery Project*, with the Poetry Project, with Bernadette Mayer. While the lines that initially caught me were written by Anne Waldman, they are so much an expression of Bernadette's experimental and generous vision of “Utopia” that they hold the whole within their holographic spirit. Through Bernadette's invitation to Anne to *UTOPIA*, I felt invited too, carried by strong friends, like Brenda and others who inhabited similarly striving-poet-utopia spaces.

Brenda encouraged me to ask Bernadette and Phil for a copy of *UTOPIA*, which helped me overcome my shyness and write to her (was it really OK to contact a poet to ask for a book?), and then *UTOPIA* arrived in its soft red cover,

with its “Utopian Copyright” that offered “every part of this book” to everyone. An entire paper could be written—probably it already has—on the subversiveness of Bernadette's Utopian Copyright. It establishes *UTOPIA* as what a book should be, a freely available repository of human knowledge to be handed (literally, by hand) generation to generation. And it is fully manifested as a Book with all its bookish components: an Introduction and an Epilogue; a “Utopian Address Book” including where (but more correctly, from whom) to get food, information, clothing, housing, advice; an Index; a Selected Bibliography; and Blurbs, including Herman Melville, who gushes, “The man is the man and the woman is the woman still no matter what: this Mayer has clear in her head, despite the bulky world.” (I still laugh every time at “bulky world.”)

UTOPIA also contains the threads of community about Bernadette at the time. Parts of it are contributed by friends, like Anne, or dedicated to friends, like Grace, letters are written, such as the one by “Mary Cadey Grade 6” (I have no idea if this letter is “real,” whatever real means), writers living and dead are quoted, interacted with, channeled, conjured. A vision of utopia is situated with epigraphs from “Socrates” and Bernadette's daughter, Sophie: “I'm going to make dinner for all the people in the world, the sun will come but it won't melt the food, and the clouds will sit quietly at the table without raining, and the moon will come but it won't get too dark.” Writing so intensely within one's family and circle of friends could be (mis)interpreted as insular, but Bernadette's reach—again, her invitation—is expansive—to children, lovers, friends, strangers, writers past and present. It finds spaces of possibility between worlds: if you wrote/write/read, you are alive, to me, the reader, hello Stein, hello Plato, hello Hawthorne, hello Melville, hello Jonathan Swift and your floating island, hello Anne, hello Lewis, hello Sophie (and hello Marie and Max!), hello Marcella.

But how, within the warmth and equity of Bernadette's invitation, the specificity of her relationships, do we manage the cold capitalist predators who chew at the lines of our circles?

One sentence in *UTOPIA* still shakes me to my core:

If, on the other hand, in the midst of a world that needs work and wherein we all know all about it, you are on your way to an important meeting to finally get rid of the landlords for good and your lover leans weakly on the table and says, “I don't feel right tonight, please dont go,” that is a whole other problem be-

cause just as a human being one should be able to be free and not have to work at a job changing the world all the time...

How often have I been in this exact same situation: do I go to the rally or do I make dinner for my son and hear about his day or do I read a book or do I write poetry? The lover's plaintive “I don't feel right tonight, please dont go.” The punctuation of it! dont go. please. And not have to work at a job—changing the world is a job. Mayer observes the complicated and anguished emotional state of living in a capitalist society with all its incessant and exhausting obligation; it imagines another way (a meeting to finally get rid of the landlords for good! Can you imagine?); it connects intimacy to transformation. It acknowledges the immensity of the system stunting our bodies and souls, how we live with tenderness within an atrocious machine of exploitation, of continual payment, the painful beauty of tender choices within a brutal system. How extraction whippers behind even the most necessary and nourishing relations between us. And how this must/should change, but how to work toward change within the confines of body within time? (And especially within creative spaces that are already a struggle to maintain?) When I am struggling with parenting or poetry or work or advocacy (which parenting these times seems also to be), that line restores me—I am not alone and Bernadette gives me permission to write into, about, and all about it. In another red-covered book I recently received, *A Family Recipe*, Rachael Guynn Wilson writes:

Now we're all sitting down
on the rubberized ground
of the city park. To say grace?
Because, Bernadette,
We want to thank you for giving us
permission to live. That was
really something,
something
really kind.

Mayer is kind but she is also so funny. And she is totally irreverent, which I realized after reading *UTOPIA*, is an essential quality of any true utopia (as utopias that take themselves too seriously end up stifling dissent and possibilities. See Louisa May Alcott's excellent, and hilarious, satire of her family's experience in a New England utopian community, “Transcendental Wild Oats.”) In “A Fish that Looks Like a Bishop,” Alcott joins in debates between fellow utopians such as Thomas More, Clark Coolidge, and “four American senators,” as well as Plato, who asks, just before Hawthorne arrives to the party, “why are you such an asshole as to think love can be dealt

out at any moment and not at every moment, you forgetful fool!”

However, even with competition like this, “Total World-Wide,” in “Two Notes on the World Government,” takes repetition and refrain to the farthest corner of funny. It begins seriously, with disarmament and ghosts, at a meeting-free meeting where “people are powerless by choice.” Then it continues onto an incredible jumble (yet a structured jumble) of colors and dinosaurs and geology and galaxies and dragons and caves that repeats with minor variations, like a new kind of sestina, but one that activates repetition throughout its entire line, not merely the end-words. One starts to smile before even realizing it.

history tells blue layers
truth geological red exacts
transition mountain a story
invented genetically to let
yellow down to the humans o
all sights languages vision
black & white extant & lost
hieroglyphic color galaxies
monkey lost history purples
dinosaurs caves by monsters
dragon human green the tool
hit yr ancestor head become
weapon beings are traveling
all over in pajama for free
asleep to solve problems by
condensed of an inspiration
heard written in pictures

Here is an echo of the extravagance and joy I once had in hearing Bernadette read a hypnagogic piece for three hours on the colors she saw on the inside of her eyelids. (The reading took place in the late 1990s at the Bubble Lounge in Tribeca.) I also think of the mysterious Renaissance book, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, that one reads less than wanders through words (that I was unsure were “accurate” translations as the work is famously untranslatable, yet translated). I think of Bernadette reading the Science section of the *Times* and reaching after the *real*, the world made new, always something new outside the body to bring in and explore through language of the body surrounded by others, strong friends and children, children's toys and drawings all colors in organic crystal form, accessible to all.

On Bernadette Mayer's *Milkweed Smithereens*

CAConrad

Dear Bernadette, I wish we could have this conversation in person, but I am confident the voices that speak with me for my poems will also lead me to you. As you say in your brilliant new book, “& in the quantum world / there is no causation, things / might happen differently from / the way you thought, don't bother thinking / get on a deer, we could save the lions.”

MILKWEED SMITHEREENS is a masterpiece, I mean, another masterpiece! No matter what book of yours is in hand, sorcery, the best kind of devilry, gets delivered! You never faltered; all your auspicious life, you never stopped talking with your poetry spirits!

*i won't tell you why but if you could only see it!
where's a moment? we are done for!
the bath of idiocy that precedes us to the waterfall*

When I think of those irritating, contemptible men of your generation threatened by your ge-

nus, how did you protect your spirit? In your poem “My Parents' Politics,” you say, “they seem to have ruined love & hope / with their dumb specific greed / i do not give up.” How did you shield yourself while keeping tuned to the poet's frequency? They caught a woman on the train smoking in the bathroom. She said the nicotine put her in a good mood, and would they prefer her in a bad mood? She laughed at the conductor, and when she sat down, I showed her your poem where you say, “we'll sit around pot-bellied stoves eating / the lobelias of fear left over from desperation.” The Cornell University Botanic website says lobelia has “structural similarities to nicotine.” Doris is her name, and she asked if we could smoke lobelia; I shrugged, and she offered me a cigarette for later. When I said I do not smoke, she said, “But they are so goddamned satisfying!”

Whenever I teach, I talk about your love of Catullus when I focus on the “intrusions” awaiting to halt our poems. You liked it when I said you could be the reincarnation of Catullus, and I think you would love my friend Jane

Goldman's new translations of his work. You could be the reincarnation of the poet, who came back to write even better poems! Your strength continues to show us how to say Fuck You to every roadblock!

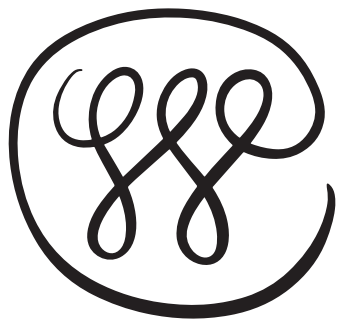
*& then to swallow it
is enough to ruin swallowing
& hunger forever, mr. jesus christ
especially when your servants
put their cocks in my mouth*

You talked about Basho and other traveling poets in Colorado when you discovered I had been living in my car for a decade. You asked, “Where do you have sex?” I said, “Everywhere!” You laughed, I laughed, and it felt so good to laugh with you. As you say in *MILKWEED SMITHEREENS*, “A slip of the tongue / Between my legs.”

It is Phil's birthday, and may he swell with all the love today. Who knows better than Phil the places you sat, the way you sat, thinking and writing in a room? This great vanishing trick of death is overwhelming.

*For what succeeds is silly maybe
For what succeeds is maybe silly
There might be nostalgia, emotion
There might be stuff unknown as death
Let something something something
Please, let something something something*

My Buddhist friends say they accept death, but I say we should be in the streets protesting an end to the end of life! Can we end the end? What would cancel it out, bring your singular laugh back into this room? In your new book, you talk about Covid, saying, “the quarantine began on phil's b'day, March 14.” Dear Bernadette, you resonate with us always! You write, “a memory is nothing / nothing is a memory // i wish i was something.” There is a poem in *MILKWEED SMITHEREENS* you wrote with Phil called “Carnival.” You or both of you wrote, “It was a sunny cold day when / yellow petals of tulips fell / on our table here and there.” I will scatter yellow today to remember you!



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At once a log of pandemic life in New York City and a meditation on selfhood, memory, and language, Simon's first book is a lyrical and timely experiment in prose fragments.

Unafraid to tack with the wind, these fragments unfold asymptotically “as they perform the kind of politics they urgently call for.” —**Rosie Stockton**

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Garth Graeper The Sky Broke More

Blending ecopoetics, ghost story, and sci-fi thriller, Garth Graeper's first full-length collection imagines survival in a world where nature, time, and identity are unstable and predatory.

Graeper's taut lyric braids human and terrestrial sound and sensation—heartbeat and howling, voice and storm, breath and birdsong—into something both beautiful and unsettled. —**Nancy Kuhl**

The earth of these poems is sincere and erotic, fraught with the unraveling of bodies in human damage, yet sounding to heal with each tone. Their care is impressive, and gorgeous. —**Jonathan Skinner**

Robert Desnos Night of Loveless Nights

Translated by Lewis Warsh
Afterword by David Rosenberg

The fiftieth-anniversary edition of New York School poet Lewis Warsh's long out-of-print translation of a major poem by a pillar of French Surrealism.

Warsh, poet, translates Desnos to bring the poem into the present, his present and ours, feverishly alive, as poem not of the past but of the future. —**Erín Moure**

Desnos's poem, in Lewis's translation, must have influenced us all with its structural changes—stanzas, then none to speak of, prose interlude, line lists, then lovely curt goodbye. I love this poem. —**Alice Notley**

Lewis Warsh, always a delicate and romantic poet, writes with the speed of intuition. —**Fanny Howe**

Richard Hell What Just Happened

With images by Christopher Wool

Richard Hell's new poems are interspersed with images created by Christopher Wool, and followed by an essay and a list.

We always knew Richard Hell was a poet, and that he was one long before he became a rock star and fashion icon. What surprises about his new poems is the density of thought they compress into their apparently casual sleeves. —**Lucy Sante**

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On The Letters of Rosemary and Bernadette Mayer, 1976–1980

Tausif Noor

“Today I feel cloudy like the weather and the city,” wrote the sculptor Rosemary Mayer in a letter to her younger sister Bernadette. It was the spring of 1976, and Rosemary had recently begun cohabitating with a new boyfriend in her Tribeca loft, her first serious relationship since her 1969 divorce from the artist Vito Acconci. Restless and insecure, she sought commiseration from Bernadette, who had recently left New York City and was living in western Massachusetts with the poet Lewis Warsh and their infant daughter Marie. In her letter, congratulating Bernadette on the emotional sincerity of *Studying Hunger*—a text the younger Mayer had published in 1975 under the guidance and goading of her psychoanalyst, David Rubinfine—Rosemary mused on the sisters’ shared sensibilities: “Maybe we have similarities in some parts of our nervous systems, our mental set-ups,” suggested Rosemary. “Or whatever one would call whatever induces particular views of, or sensitivities to, the world.”

By the mid-1970s, the sisters Mayer had established themselves within the New York avant-garde, working across text and image to fashion a new poetics of the everyday: Rosemary with her fabric sculptures and “temporary monuments,” and Bernadette as a fixture in the poetry and conceptual art scenes, having edited the magazine *0 to 9* with Acconci and debuted her pathbreaking installation photo and sound installation *Memory* in 1972. Beneath the sisters’ aesthetic inclinations lurked family tragedy: their parents had died in quick succession by the late 1950s, leaving Bernadette and Rosemary the orphaned wards of disinterested, conservative kin whom they would leave behind for the freedoms of downtown bohemia. “Our past is extreme + we have the world to deal with as well,” Bernadette would write back in a separate missive that October. “I don’t even need to express this. It’s so difficult to speak of these things in a letter.”

Between 1976 and 1980, Bernadette and Rosemary’s shared past—alongside their professional woes and aspirations, impressions of their milieu, and experiences as female artists—would furnish an intense epistolary relationship, one that has recently been made available in a beautifully designed volume and which testifies not only to the singular brilliance of these two artists, but to a shifting consciousness around artistic labor and the infrastructure required to support it. Edited by Marie Warsh and art historian Gillian Sneed, the letters from this period of intense productivity—during which the sisters Mayer were closer than ever, though living relatively far apart—showcases how these women navigated the terrain of artistic success and failure, supporting one another while also articulating their distinct, discrepant personalities and approaches to an artistic life. Published on the heels of the traveling exhibition *Rosemary Mayer: Ways of Attaching*, which toured a set of North American and European venues from 2020–21, this collection not only adds to the growing corpus of refreshing, rigorous scholarship on the sisters Mayer but more broadly contributes to a necessary feminist revisionism of postwar American art history.

Structured in four chronological chapters that each detail a year of correspondence, the collected letters illuminate how the “mental set-ups” of Rosemary and Bernadette, however similarly attuned to the world outside, were conditioned by their

working environments. When the letters begin in 1976, Bernadette and Lewis, living off the support of an NEA grant, are collaborating on what would become *Piece of Cake*, a series of daily writing experiments; the following August, they would work on its sequel, *Leek House*, and also begin publishing *United Artists* magazine, to which Rosemary would contribute. The extent of the sisters’ collaboration, though documented in the *Ways of Attaching* exhibition and elsewhere, is a key insight brought to light through this collection. Beyond contributing to each other’s publications, the sisters also shared reading recommendations from Louis Sullivan to Octavio Paz, Annie Dillard, and Theodor Adorno; a catalog of their eclectic interests from these letters alone would provide a world-class education. In Massachusetts, though Bernadette and Lewis Warsh’s days are filled with the quotidian chores involved in raising Marie (and later, her younger siblings Sophia and Max), the pair carve out time to write and work at night. And while they are removed from their urban milieu of New York—where they would return in 1980 when Bernadette accepts the directorship at the Poetry Project—their New England years are also the time when they developed friendships with nearby writers like Fanny Howe, Russell Banks, Clark Coolidge, and Bill Corbett, and hosted visitors like Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley.

In her letters, Bernadette tends to catalog the textures of her working and social life in long streams of consciousness, often typewritten at night when the children have been put to bed:

The typewriter makes me feel chatty because it’s so easy and fast to say things since I’m typing at a great speed and also it’s good therapy for me because since the book is finished I’m dying to still be feeling that I’m writing something, I can’t stand not to be working, I’m an inevitable, I mean inveterate worker.

Her missives tend to be heavy on factual details, recounting events and impressions, updates on her children’s milestones. Frequently, they are peppered with sisterly advice: “Trust your instincts, Rosemary!” she writes in 1976 [emphasis in original]; “The only thing is to keep working + NOT GET TIRED.” Leaning into her role as a mother, Bernadette seems to ventriloquize a kind of sageness, a tone that is only heightened by the neat, typewritten lines of her words—and perhaps further exacerbated by Rosemary’s more frequent, more confessional, and sometimes downright needy letters. The first letter in the volume seems to set up this dichotomy, with Rosemary frankly discussing her unemployment, her recent bout of diarrhea, and her dieting; she speaks candidly about her need for solitude to do work, her obsessions and doubts: “I set myself impossible schedules or deadlines that no one could meet and then get upset,” she laments. “Tried to concentrate on me the person ... Am I always tired? Or only for the last year?” she asks in September of 1976. “Is this a depressing letter?” A touching refrain in the sisters’ letters is their concluding implorations for the other to write soon, write more, write more frequently.

Rosemary’s self-consciousness lends her letters a pathos that creates a space for relatability and often, levity: she writes candidly about being drunk, about being depressed, about feeling lazy. Often, she is droll about the art scene in New York (“The galleries are dull”) and her ambivalence toward it, as in recounting a panel on art and politics featuring Donald Judd: “His naivete about the implications of his work was surprising. Lots of really awful people were also there as always.” Like her

ebullient sculptures named after historical female figures, oftentimes sharing the same name or other small point of connection, Rosemary’s letters surface a desire for connection, however transient. So too do we see Bernadette’s vulnerability, her desire to succeed as a mother, a partner, an artist. Through letter writing—an exchange premised on mutual trust that produces a particular space of connection—a sense of the sisters’ characters comes into focus: practical Bernadette, whimsical Rosemary. But because the epistolary space is also a stage for performance, these roles are not fixed. As an artist, Rosemary is just as much of a workaholic, particularly toward the end of the volume when her sculptures and public performances demand more of her time; Bernadette, too, finds room to blurt out her honest feelings, her volatility, her loneliness, going so far as to confess that she doubts her own existence when left to her own devices.

Prompted by distance, letter writing allowed the artist and sisters to express intimate desires and fears as artists, but retrospectively, we can also see how they acted as a staging ground for future work. The rhythms of domestic life would shape the content and form of Bernadette’s December 1978 masterpiece *Midwinter Day*, for which she asked Rosemary for recommendations on contemporary art in January of that year. And her exchanges with Bill Berkson, roughly contemporary to this period and gathered in the 2006 collection *What’s Your Idea of a Good Time?*, demonstrate the extent to which the form was crucial to her thinking and her thinking with others. During the mid-1970s, Rosemary Mayer’s installations from this period became more and more conceptual and ephemeral, with works like *Spell* (1977) and *Some Days in April* (1978) and *Connections* (1978) premised on connection and correspondence that, like these letters, understood meaning to be not only relational but resting as much in the dematerialization of objects as in their construction, perfectly illustrated by her 1979 installation of snow sculptures for the Lenox Library in Massachusetts. Moreover, in reading these letters, we get a sense of the sacrifices—personal, financial, emotional—that the Mayers made in order to pursue a particular kind of life, one that could be counted in grant applications, in the days anticipating a check in the mail, in the moments before the big break. The letters also and equally measure time in increments of pleasure and surprise. We watch as Marie and Sophia and Max grow teeth and make friends; we see the grants come in, the seasons pass. Among the many joys of the collection is the wealth of archival treasures, including family Polaroids of the Warshes in Massachusetts, rare installation shots of Rosemary’s exhibitions, and facsimiles of some of the actual correspondence, replete with Bernadette’s doodles of ginkgo leaves.

I’m not ashamed to admit that when I received this volume, I treated it like a divination guide, flipping to the closest corresponding date to see how it was to live as an artist in ’77, ’78, ’79 and to find some signs for how to live now. For the last few years, Bernadette and Rosemary have shepherded my own attempts to eke out some kind of life as a writer, a life with other writers, a life with a poet in particular. While helping my boyfriend move into my apartment this past winter, I found a note I’d written four years ago, slipped into the copy of Bernadette’s collected I gave him for his birthday, right before the time I was beginning to fall in love: “Bernadette was born on May 12th, so she’s a Taurus, and not quite a Gemini, but the poems I think are still forgiving of his fact.” After Bernadette

died last November, it was hard to read in general, and impossible to read these letters in particular; they felt too elegiac, too distant. I kept getting stuck at the introductory declaration: “Bernadette Mayer (b. 1945) is a poet and writer, the author of over thirty books...” I wanted the *is* to stay *is*, to not shift to *was*, even though it already had, *has*. The weeks passed and reading got easier. I continue to flip to random pages and dip into the river of their thoughts. It remains difficult, however, to accurately convey the extent to which the work of Rosemary and Bernadette Mayer have shaped the way I think, who I believe myself to be, what this all might be for. “Past + present’s all I have to write about,” wrote Bernadette one day in October 1977, “I feel I alternate.” It’s all I have to write about too, and I look to them for answers. Write to me soon.

On All This Thinking: The Correspondence of Bernadette Mayer and Clark Coolidge

Cam Scott

Of all those who have taught us how to write, few figures are so general and so fundamental as Bernadette Mayer and Clark Coolidge—separately and as a pair—whose work treats more of what is in the world than I’d thought possible when I went out for language. “Surely somebody should ‘fund’ a conversation between us, dont you think?” Mayer asks Coolidge in an affectionate letter of late 1982, and their collected correspondence does one better—framing an ad libitum exchange of infectious earnestness: “i know in the rigidity of our thoughts,” Mayer writes, “we owe at the very least each other these letters, though i apologize for being overly serious I guess.”

Gathered from Coolidge’s archive at the Uni-

versity of Buffalo and the Mayer collection at UC San Diego, *All This Thinking* collects three years of letters composed between September 1979 and October 1982. This flush of rapid, detailed exchange arrives relatively late in a lengthy friendship, beginning in the 1960s when Mayer and Coolidge solicited each other’s work for *Joglars* and *0 to 9* respectively. The poets wouldn’t meet in person until 1969, striking up the bicoastal, asynchronous repartee that would motivate and theorize their next decades of work; including the collaborative texts written between 1972 and 1978 and published many years later as *The Cave*. These letters build on and extend that outpost, marking the authors’ deep commitment to each other’s lives and writing in a period of restive creativity.

This is not simply a correspondence about the social vicissitudes and sceneries of poetry, though it is that too—rather, *All This Thinking* reads beautifully as a poem in two voices; volleying grudges and enthusiasms, tales of survival and competition, drafts and verdicts, over several crucial years in torqued and stacking paragraphs. Of all the letters I’ve read, few collections fare so well as literature—nor as theory, nor as memoir—where the intimacy that Mayer and Coolidge sustain at considerable distance entails a wealth of social reenactment and cool self-appraisal. These communications are of frequently breathtaking quality—evinced a showy profligacy from both parties, lightly competitive, that in some moments rivals or anticipates the highpoints of each author’s output.

I’ve waffled on whether it’s acceptable to describe these letters as literature, where both participants are so careful in making the very distinctions that their respective bodies of work seem to repeatedly defy. As Mayer writes to Coolidge on October 2, 1979, “I think a letter turns out to be writing, as I am learning in doing my book, yet it is not quite writing but something else I can come close to doing and then turn away, like a seduction or something, which I enjoy doing, coming close to when I’m writing for the book (for the books?) but then when I’m writing a real letter I can see what the differences are and they are just as distinct and clear as my demands for time.” Even this breathlessly digressive sentence—for each thought, however ornate, seems always to supply a single living sentence—impresses me with its effortless poetry, “like a seduction or something.” (Notably, Mayer still refers to “writing” here, in the undifferentiated parlance

of the day, even as she carefully distinguishes craft from her correspondence; and the considered differences between the poets and their peers, the “LANGUAGE guys,” furnish these letters some of their most introspective and superior moments of self-assessment.)

Where Coolidge describes his craft-oriented letters as a “poet’s sidebar,” and the pair discusses Mayer’s “letters book” (finally published in 1994 as *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*) as a series of imaginary correspondences, it’s clearly preferable to maintain a meta- and contextual distinction between letters and literature—the better to observe the epistolary effects that Mayer elsewhere aces. But the temptation of conflation isn’t only an effect of how enjoyable these letters are to read some decades later; it’s also an implication of the generosity, excitability, and duration of the authors’ respective projects, which seem and strive to include, well, Everything—“The Manifold,” as they discuss at characteristic length.

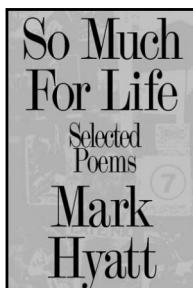
No one more so than Mayer, or Coolidge, has perfected the writerly illusion of composing at the pace of thought or sound. In each of their torrential bodies of work, words tail experience as if its signature. At every moment, Mayer’s work supposes the possibility of a totally annotated reality, fully commensurate with the act of writing; while Coolidge’s materially attentive epics seem to wring sound from fibers of time. By markedly different, though highly collegial means, Coolidge and Mayer extend the crucial insight of Jack Kerouac and his few true prosodical peers: that writing is an air we breathe and ought to be as common and enlivening. “Surely writing could conceivably never stop, I would hope so, I would hope it could be so—to be such a lunatic would be sublime, thus the silence we speak about,” Mayer writes on February 6, 1982, as her flagship work, *Midwinter Day*, was being prepared for publication:

Somebody someday has to do that work of never stopping, of going as fast as it can be gone to that point, dare I say it, of eliminating existence at all so that, and that would be an interesting moment, which gets gotten to sometimes in poems, or in Proust, you’ve faintly gotten to the end of reminiscence and all experience and certainly all knowledge (if you have it), and get left with the great and wonderful high blank of no purpose at last but a mind wherein you can know exactly (ha!) how you and everyone else too exists in

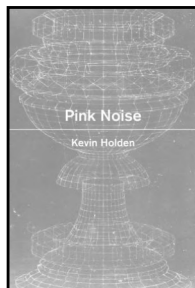
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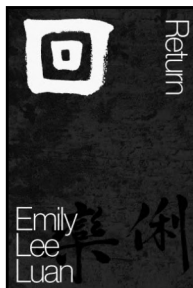
CRUEL/CRUEL
DIOR J. STEPHENS
A response to the unimaginable cruelties that became our new quotidian in 2020 that moves musically and discursively through innovative permutations of lyric form.



SO MUCH FOR LIFE
MARK HYATT, ED. SAM LADKIN AND LUKE ROBERTS
A long awaited collection of poems by Mark Hyatt, one of the great lost writers of mid-century British poetry.



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KEVIN HOLDEN
A book of prismatic, lyrical poems that enhance and disrupt the pastoral tradition to consider organic and mineral worlds, queer desire and experience, the mathematical and the spiritual, struggle and resistance.



RETURN
EMILY LEE LUAN
Through the recurrence of memory, myth, and grief, *Return* captures the elusive language of sorrow and solitude that binds Taiwanese diasporic experience.



NOTES FROM THE PASSENGER
GILLIAN CONOLEY
Sonically vivid, as empire and climate fall into catastrophe, these poems open portals where the living and the dead find one another in new communication.



Kissing Other People Or The House of Fame
KAY GABRIEL
Composed of a year out of Gabriel’s dream journal, this book is an experiment in mouthing collective language on the premise that what seems irretrievably personal is in fact most social and most shared.

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the world at this time (not the times but breathing).

Prior to its publication here, Coolidge quotes this letter in a remembrance for the 25th anniversary of *On the Road* that same year: “By the way, I used a great sentence from your last letter in mine (sentence about the Great Everything Writing, which just perfectly set down all I wanted to get in there about that.)” And in 1991, Coolidge cites his exchange with Mayer once more in a presentation at Naropa University, again referring Kerouac’s patented sketchbook babble to what he and Mayer prefer to call “the Everything Work”—a cultivated habit of observation and improvisation apt to capture every thought that crosses the writing mind. This phrase appears in a letter from Coolidge to Mayer, dated December 7, 1981, which eventually elicits her breathless response above. Coolidge writes:

Of course another side of this whole project is to just start writing and make a sheer EVERYTHING work and never stop and just let the chips, something I’ve yet to dare to do, would you have to stop everything (else) in order to include everything? A work of the pure endless (?) consciousness striving ...

Mayer’s writerly flush of enthusiasm stops just short of professing enlightenment, where her means are more diligent and open to investigation. Nevertheless, these letters grace our present understanding with the dated traces of a real epiphany; a prolonged creative burst in which her already keen conceptualism finds a new font of content in the catalog of space itself. Above all else, this remains Mayer’s major, generalizable insight: the writing is already there, as dream and diary, we only have to learn to keep receipts. (Elsewhere, she speaks of “the limitless nightride of sentences we’ll either have or not, it’s kind of handed out to us.”) This ethical dimension of Mayer’s writing comes across more and less strongly at different points in her career, and may even be counterbalanced to a degree by a figure like Coolidge, whose comprehensiveness somehow resists formalization. In Coolidge’s writing, it isn’t that everything is a poem; rather, the poem could be anything. “I guess I’m an amasser,” he confesses to Mayer as a kindred correspondent: “The brain is a full place.”

Mayer, too, amasses; and there’s so much more to learn from this comparison, to say nothing of the deep agreement that these poets share—not only with each other but with a common spate of references and desires. “Memory is a voice ... of nobody,” Coolidge writes after Mayer’s example: “You’re less yourself (in terms of that single personality you ‘recognize’) and more other things, forces & voices.” In this co-authored account, these other forces are both numinous and daily, held in trust by the confidence of these two writers in each other, and the everything they alternate and share.

“the fabric of human life”: Teaching Bernadette Mayer

Rona Cran

On the wall of my office is a poem by Bernadette Mayer—“Walking Like a Robin.” Although it’s a poem most obviously about age, for me it also shapes and informs the way I teach Mayer’s work, because it reminds me, as Saranne Weller writes, that “becoming a teacher... is first and foremost concerned with recognising ourselves as learners.”¹ For me, teaching, learning, and this poem, are about encounter. In class, when I talk about Mayer’s long poem *Memory* (1971), I think about this little one—about poets and students and little round orange-breasted birds taking “3 or 4 steps,” before stopping, to “look smell taste touch & hear.” I think about how robins have been in the world longer than the word “orange,” and of Bernadette² turning “like seventy,” and “falling apart,” only to offer the pieces of herself up to us to take “back home,” when her self-stitching falls apart. Such fugitive fragments coalesce in *Memory*, and are what we have of her there, dark young poet moving sensuously through her world in the moments that make up a whole month, five decades ago. I don’t talk directly about “Walking Like a Robin” with my students. This poem, for me, is a little bit like James Schuyler’s secret fifth season, in his poem “Thursday”—it’s “my secret, and I’m going / to keep it that way.”³ And yet, confounding my worries about how they will grapple with *Memory*’s density, length, and refusal of the easy lyric, my students’ approach is intuitive and affective, like the robin’s, like Bernadette’s: to encounter this text, they recognize, is to “look smell taste touch & hear.”

Memory arrives five weeks into my undergraduate course on twentieth-century New York City poetics, called “Multiple Voices.” I’m usually a little anxious about teaching *Memory*, because it pivots, ostensibly, away from the bright energy of Frank O’Hara, the navigable contiguity of Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Diane di Prima, and the great anger of Audre Lorde, Amiri Baraka, and Sonia Sanchez, all of whom precede Mayer on the course. And yet I want to teach it, and relish doing so, because the vertiginous nature of *Memory*’s form, and its handling of ideas, is immensely freeing for students, meaningfully shaping their responses to (and experiences of) poetry and its contexts throughout the rest of the semester, and beyond. *Memory* permits them to ask—and to try to answer—what poetry is, and how we know. It facilitates new intersections between readers and writers, allowing for meditations on the promises held out by experimentation, on the unknowable shades and textures of time, on what happens

when language resists us, on the ideals and practicalities of collective, connective reading, thinking, and remembering. It also enables students to connect what happens textually and photographically with their own lives, extending their studies beyond the classroom as they come to examine the ways in which what first appears to be a hyper-local artifact also relates to and illuminates the structures of the world in which they live.

In an effort to mitigate perceptions of *Memory*’s difficulty, and to offer a more accessible way into her pedagogically valuable work, I set Joe Brainard’s *I Remember* (1970–75) alongside it. The connection between them is thematic and contextual: these are texts produced by writers preoccupied with the tangled enmeshment of memory with art, who are associated with the New York School, and whose commonalities and differences take shape in the context of discussions about what it means to remember, and how we do it, and about the city, The Poetry Project, and the world beyond both. What are these texts, my students ask. Poems? This they take as given, because it’s a poetry course, but they also want more, and the texts themselves seem to want more too. This is partly why they are such generative texts to teach. They contain multitudes; they refuse the tyranny of the singular perspective; they open minds to the possibilities and opportunities that arise when texts insist on their own versatility. Other things too, then, though nothing wholly, or exclusively: *Memory* and *I Remember* are self-stitched fragments of autobiography, performance, documentary, memory, memoir, confession, oversharing. Objects. “Emotional science projects,” Bernadette might say. Places. Spaces. Ecopoems. Exercises in reading. Communal experiences. Enactments of the workings of consciousness. A means, *pace* Foucault, of dealing with time.

To prepare for class, I ask my students to read all of *I Remember*, and to engage with *Memory* in whatever way they find most enabling: some read it cover-to-cover, while others focus on the beginning and ending, on particular days or weeks, on the moments where prose is transmuted into poetic lines, on the photographs and their relationship to the text, on the scholarly and poetic conversations that *Memory* has given rise to, or on listening to recorded extracts. Our collective understanding of what the texts are, or might be, takes shape first through reflective writing, and then through a discussion that asks more questions than it can answer. “Memory forms the fabric of human life,” Marita Sturken writes in *Tangled Memories*; it “establishes life’s continuity.”⁴ How do Mayer and Brainard grapple with memory, we ask; how do they establish life’s

continuity? What is the nature of their poetics and politics of remembering? How do the structures and forms of *Memory* and *I Remember* reflect or embody the ways in which we remember, and the significance of how we do so, or fail to do so? What do Mayer and Brainard share of themselves? Do they dramatize or mythologize themselves in any way? Where is the drama, where the myth? The private, the public? Where is New York? Here, but also not. What about the New York School? How do *Memory* and *I Remember* contribute to or complicate our assumptions about the New York School as a group (of friends), a movement, a collection of ideas, a radical center of community-building, a style, a voice or set of voices? We explore Brainard’s career as a visual artist and Mayer’s 1000-plus snapshots, and the students notice the color palettes (blues, yellows, oranges, greens) that emerge across Siglio’s beautiful 2020 edition of *Memory*, marking the time of day or the location the photos were taken, the temptation of the visual as it relates to the “temptation” of language, spoken and heard. We talk about excess, about putting in and leaving out, about the failure of language and communication, about how the *doing* means just as much as the *done*, about how nothing is too small to remember.

Whilst Brainard’s work proves more popular, the densities and maximalism of *Memory* strike a particular chord with several students, who subsequently explore in writing the distinct resonance they have felt with Mayer’s work. This is on account, variously, of Mayer’s “unconventional forms,” the “sheer scope of the work,” her multidirectional collaborations (primarily—and I love this suggestion—with different versions of herself). It’s because of what one student calls her “appetiteness,” and the ways in which this extraordinary multimodal text reveals memory to be a “hyper-precise, individualized experience wrought with personal anxieties and recollections,” and yet, simultaneously, “an expansive, collective faculty” that elicits and requires sharing, or even over-sharing. The originality, ambition, and innovativeness that characterizes these essays emphasizes the pedagogical empowerment that inheres in *Memory*.

One assignment continues to develop our class discussion, reading *Memory* in dialogue with *I Remember*, paying close attention to the language used in both, and drawing out the anxieties inherent in their authors’ processes of recording and archiving memories. For this student—Alice—Mayer’s “multiple references to time and scope,” as well as her lineation, and her lingering on the word “forget” at the very end of *Memory*, speak to the endurance of “even the smallest of individual moments or

experiences,” and to her “sense of anxiety and instability in her own internalized narrative.” Ella, meanwhile, reads the production of *Memory* in the context of Mayer’s Poetry Project workshops and Ed Bowes’s early-1970s film of her and Clark Coolidge reading Gertrude Stein while being chased (by Ed) around Coolidge’s home in the Berkshires. For Ella, *Memory* is an experiment in decentering, and thereby freeing, the self, enabling Mayer to engage in a process of self-collaboration in order to “form something new,” something that exists beyond ego, “beyond Mayer herself.” Poppy’s work, finally, thinks about the effects of “translating” *Memory* “out of its original form.” Poppy traces *Memory*’s development from unfolding, deeply personal, labor-intensive process to immersive gallery experience to unadorned manuscript to archive to sensuous, glossy hardback to performed parallel durational work to the PDF version in which she first encountered it. Poppy makes the case for *Memory* as fundamentally predicated on physical encounter, envisioning the gallery space at 98 Greene Street in 1972 as embodying “the experience of remembering itself... jumbled, both linear and non-linear,” and informed by “non-chronology and a sense of dissonance between audio and visual stimulus.” For her, memory and *Memory* are subjective experiences of seeing, thinking, hearing, touching, and moving, with the result that “a large part of the original *Memory*’s impact becomes invisible when translated into the medium of a book.” This, she observes, is partly because the “immersive audio dimension of the work is lost” and partly because “the book form imposes a much more rigid structure” on Mayer’s memories and our experiences of them than a gallery space, in which “linear documentation” communicates “delicately... with non-linearity.” Instead, Poppy suggests, we might imagine “an unbound ‘book’ of *Memory*, produced with pages packed loosely in a box,” or something akin to Eileen Myles’s *Snowflake / different streets* (2012), which “houses two separate collections of poetry printed back-to-back, and in opposite orientations,” in order to highlight how readerly interactions “extend into a work’s physical form,” and how, in life, we are recurrently “confronted by the material qualities of what we hold, view or otherwise interact with.”

Bernadette died shortly after our collective encounters with *Memory*. I stood in front of my students and said: “I’m sorry to tell you that Bernadette Mayer died yesterday.” Two years previously, standing in front of a different cohort, I had said the same thing about Diane di Prima, another bird poet on our course (the kind that “flies backward”), another force of nature and poetry, another storyteller and voyager. Next fall, when I introduce a new cohort to *Memory*, Bernadette won’t be out there, across the pond, walking like a robin. But she will be in our classroom, astonishing everyone by putting everything in and leaving everything out, all at the same time. Like di Prima, she will “shine / and shine / unspent and underground.”⁶ And she’ll be in

the work that results, in writing animated by original thought and attention to language and experience, each essay evincing aspects of Mayer’s own description of *Memory*, “short space[s] of time” that somehow “take up a lot of room.”⁷ Maybe next time I’ll let my students in on my “secret” poem, and we’ll all walk around like robins.

Notes

All student work has been used with permission. Special thanks to Poppy Baxter, Alice Millington, and Ella Morris-Skingley.

1. Saranne Weller, *Academic Practice: Developing as a Professional in Higher Education* (Sage, 2015), 2.

2. Bernadette is my mother’s name, and partly as a result of this, I find myself slipping with easy familiarity into referring to Mayer as “Bernadette,” though I never knew her personally.

3. James Schuyler, “Thursday,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: the Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998 (1993)), 311-2.

4. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

5. Diane di Prima’s first book of poetry, published in 1958, was called *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*.

6. Diane di Prima, “The Window,” in *Pieces of a Song* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990), 18.

7. Bernadette Mayer, preface to *Memory* (New York: Siglio, 2020), 7.

On Collaboration, or Wing of a Luna Moth

Jennifer Karmin

Dear Bernadette,

How many poets does it take to change a lightbulb?

Answer: One poet—to invent a memory of the lightbulb. A pattern of communication. I remember the first time I visited in the summer of 2009 and you said “Ask me anything. What do you want to know?” I remember you laughed whenever we saw the road sign for Brainard, NY on the way to your house. I remember you were trying to show me a purple flower next to the creek and fell under the cold water. I remember then you popped up and said “That was enlightening!” I remember watching *Hot Tub Time Machine* together and you wanted the writing to be stronger. I remember waking up in my Chicago apartment and you were feeding Walt Whitman, my beagle, vanilla ice cream for breakfast and a few spoonfuls for yourself. I remember waking up in your East Nassau house to typing and you said the typewriter was your lullaby when the kids were babies.

Answer: Two poets—it’s a collaboration. Someone to write the grant and someone to hand out the lightbulbs to any people who want them. Working poets experiment every day to manage our lives. Paying the electricity bill, feeding our families, and navigating the healthcare system can take a lot of innovation. Collaboration creates a gift economy, deepening our solidarity with others. It’s like a guaranteed annual income for everybody so we can all get the lightbulbs we need.

Answer: Zero poets—we don’t use light bulbs anymore. We’ve harnessed the non-polluting power of the sun, wind and our poetry through the research generated at The Octavia Butler, Buckminster Fuller, María Sabina, Hannah Weiner Center for Free Energy. We’re utopographers. We like art with no boundaries. We’re co-creating a living language. The praxis of liberation. We walk through Poetry State Forest and sit at the spot where the Tsatsawassa Creek meets the Kinderhook Creek, chanting in chorus “property is robbery property is robbery.” We dream up the word *gubofi*, an acronym for “guy who bought the field.” We’re hoping *gubofi* will enter the English language, as in “everybody has their *gubofi* to deal with.” We write poems about neutrinos and the etymology of the clitoris. We’re searching for the island of Utopia. Are we there yet?

Answer: However many poets turn up and

want to participate. It’s like being at a big backyard picnic. We combine our brains for this moment of time. A commitment to a project. It’s a kind of creative freedom where there’s no success or failure. To do something new. To move out of our comfort zone. We made this up. You say try waking up every August morning at 3:15am to write with your friends. A yearly collaborative-consciousness writing experiment. Observe hypnagogic and hypnopompic sleep states collectively. You say try a writing marathon with your friends in one room for 8 hours, arrange the results chronologically and then publish the group poem as *Unnatural Acts*. You say try counting lightning in the dark and listening to the thunder on the front porch with me. We will try writing more poems tomorrow.

Writing poetry with friends is an act of love. A maximalist adventure in words. A mutual investigation of time and place. You and Anne Waldman attending New York Nets games to co-write *The Basketball Article*. You and Clark Coolidge exploring Eldon’s Cave in Massachusetts to co-write *The Cave*. You and Bill Berkson interviewing each other through poems in New York and California to co-write *What’s Your Idea of a Good Time?* Making up a Utopia with contributions from your pals Charles Bernstein, Joe Brainard, Peggy DeCoursey, John Fisk, Bob Holman, Rochelle Kraut, Greg Masters, Rosemary Mayer, Huang O, Anne Rower, Lorna Smedman, Lewis Warsh, Hannah Weiner, and more. Printing your book with a utopian copyright for readers so “All rights remain unreserved and free including the right of reproduction in whole or part or in any form or way that seems pleasing or useful to you.”

Well Bernadette, how many poets does it take to change a lightbulb? I don’t actually have the answer. But when we wrote poems together, we sure did have many questions. Where are the missing socks? When is the best time for a revolution? Is there another thistle plant, like the one by the front porch yet? How will capitalism disappear? Are the thistle plants taking over? Are they edible? Who decided to make a human into a slave? Why is the sky white? What amount of money is enough? What’s the best way to get rid of deer ticks? Why are the rich still in control? If a bird walks in a field, does that mean there’s a flying theater? When is the best time for an orgasm? If we buy cheese in our dreams, can we eat it later? Who screamed the loudest? Is \$84 enough to buy a house with a swimming pool? Where are the best drugs? What is the best French food? Where is the greenest place on earth? If some words are just delightful to say aloud or see on the page, why don’t we tell everybody it’s fun?

We agree: metaphor really is a symbolic representation of a literal moment. I found the sealed white envelope you sent me with your typed words “wing of a luna moth.” Positive phototaxis is why moths are attracted to light. They fly higher on moonlit nights because they can use the moon and stars to orientate themselves. Moths have an escape-route mechanism related to light. To a moth in danger, flying toward light is a better response than flying toward darkness.

Big love,
Jennifer

P.S. - I also found the letter with your recommendations for Introduction to Anarchism 101 and I promise to finish reading all of the books.

- * *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* by Alexander Berkman
- * *Voltaire de Cleyre*, anything she wrote
- * *François Marie Charles Fourier*, anything he wrote
- * *Living My Life* by Emma Goldman
- * *Steal This Book* by Abbie Hoffman
- * *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*
- * *Mutual Aid* by Peter Kropotkin
- * *Teach Yourself Fucking* by Tuli Kupferberg
- * *Poetry and Anarchism* by Herbert Read

P.P.S. - Can neutrinos move faster than the speed of light? Scientists have disagreed so please let me know what you find out. When we began chatting about neutrinos in 2009, you typed up this: “The most difficult poetry assignment I ever envisioned is to write a 10-line poem about neutrinos with alternating lines containing a metaphor and a gerund. Here are Jennifer Karmin’s & my, Bernadette Mayer’s, groundbreaking neutrino poems.”

Vital Statistics of Neutrinos

Jennifer Karmin

a neutrino is form and content
neutrinos enjoy exhaling the universe at 3:15am

a neutrino is ideas and solutions
neutrinos practice writing buckminster fuller poetry

a neutrino is mental ingenuity
neutrinos believe in fighting against inanimate slavery

a neutrino is a trillion trillion trillion clitorises
neutrinos escape interacting with the speed of light

a neutrino is the great experiment
neutrinos hate sniffing gravitational glue

A Neutrino Casino

Bernadette Mayer

a lepton, the neutrino is a clitoris
to us, a clit, maneuvering
past the explosion, neutrally, not neutralizing
it is a scandinavian country
taking no part in anything moving
a conscientious objector
unwilling to be party to any collision
but, a secretary of state, she has some weight
you know she has been being there
over two hundred trillion trillion trillion massless earths
are passing through the sun every second
not to speak of you, you muon monster!

p.s. if i say to my sister: i’m not me
i’m a neutrino, passing through you
is she still the same?

from *The Basketball Article*

Bernadette Mayer and Anne Waldman

The Basketball Article (*Angel Hair Press, 1975*) was conceived in November 1974 and written in April 1975 as an assignment for OUI magazine. We got to go to all the Nets games we wanted through Barney Kremenko, Publicity, but Jim Wergeles of the Knicks balked, “What do you girls really do?” We heard he was a jock. We got to go to the first women’s basketball game held in Madison Square Garden. We wrote a review that was rejected for being too technical. We tried not to make The Basketball Article too technical so it was rejected by a group of editors a few of whom thought it “was a minor masterpiece,” the others “couldn’t tell what the hell was going on” with it. . . . — Bernadette Mayer, 1975

Traveling. All teams should meet in the center of the world and stay there for the 80-game season. There would be no fans but the other teams. McAdoo, the NBA’s leading scorer and most valuable player, might cheer for Gianelli. As a fan, he could get thrown out of the game for two technicals, or for trying to play center for the Knicks. There would be no two million dollar deals for Walton because the fans would all be professionals and they’d get in free. Too bad then, there’d be no women at the games, except as invited guests. And the wives and families of the players. All of Walt Frazier’s girlfriends could attend. But no one would know this. After the game the professionals would meet secretly to exchange plays without the knowledge of the coaches. Jabbar would spend time training Marvin Webster to be the Nets’ new center. The season would last two months after which the players would emerge from the center of the world, change their identities and not have to be healthy, competitive citizens. Then they would travel to all parts of the world for free with a special basketball identification card. Some would become astronauts. Some would join the Communist Party.

from *Oh You Nameless and New-Named Ridges*

Bernadette Mayer

03.25.20

ANATOMICAL SPRING

if I say this poem is a letter
like magic then this letter is a poem
like this endless empty field is a stage
and this state is not a field, like this letter-poem
messes up the magic and glamour of the grammar
and all we're left with is the next thing we see

ancient Roman poets used to write 11-syllable lines
recently I heard of poems that are like Mars Bars
let's write a poem that's shaped like spring!
or say things that look like circles, did you ever
eat lichen to stave off starvation? or dreamed you
were a bird?

(this is the letter)

Dear Lea,

an anagram of my name is "bent dream eatery." I
should've put that in the poem-letter. Dave Brinks
found it for me. A letter contains what you forgot
to put in the poem. Don Yorty's poems I think of as
letters, that's how I read them, for me though, a
letter is something that Phil doesn't have to type on
the computer. "Mayer" isn't a Dactyll but an Iamb,
wait it's a trochee, unstressed altogether so each
syllable is actually unstressed, the sun's out but I
already took a walk, where do you walk these days?

Love,

Bernadette

p.s. I should have said: Dear editrix

millions of those little wings— poems for Bernadette

These poems were gathered from a group of writers with a wide range of relation to Bernadette: friends, lovers, students, readers, admirers. Some of the poems are collaborations with Bernadette, some are inspired by her friendship and her singular way, and some were stoked by any number of her endlessly useful list of experiments. In the spirit of her contributions to our practice as writers, her encouragement for more and more of our poems, we hope you take these poems as each their own invitation to your life and writing—as Don Yorty, Philip Good, and Bernadette herself invite:

“Reader, join us if you want to. Let’s eat!”

The Idle Ladder Max Left *Cliff Fyman & Bernadette Mayer*

The first day of autumn is spreading out
evenly beyond the little boxes of time
Cliff might be going to the chop board
with a pocketful of chips of locust limbs
on a day accidentally golden
Let’s walk to the war protest rally
and add to the head count
little things mean a lot in the time space
continuum. It means a lot to return
to talk to you. It means a lot to return
to talk to you too. You could
fool us into thinking it was still summer
or April fool’s day when we walked
to the creek and were awed
by the fossil footprints of faster animals
What are you really thinking, yesterday?
To follow the line of thinking in this
charged space...I am everywhere,
are you with me today?
Yes I’m with you today. Let’s make some
buttery *rugelach* for Friday night
Let’s step outside the camp for
a minute and raise some sparks!
Like two perfect poached pears
on a day accidentally golden

22 September 04

91 *Don Yorty, Philip Good, & Bernadette Mayer*

Cooking something is like you’re saying it
saying just what you think when you make food
I mean give words to it. Poets are good
cooks. Even after her stroke Bernadette
can still bake a chicken, prepare and stick
it in the oven, bring it out just right.
Phil grills sausage and sets them in our sights
thick sensual ready to bite. Who mixed
the salad with herbs from the woods and greens
chilled and tossed naked with fresh vinaigrette?
Who put the bread and cheese here? Bernadette!
I cut lemons, my fingers straining seeds
squeeze over ice and vodka, no small feat.
Reader, join us if you want to. Let’s eat!

Notebook 4

Violet Spurlock

All the way back in that hallway
My voice strains with composed desperation
I need a decade and a home to even speak of dinner, apparently
While nanoseconds seep through every crack of my face
The distant apartment imagines me disrobing in it
Mud is a fine cause, it formed the men we mention
So we like to watch their images blur and speak
In the far reaches of our homes we can become ourselves or each other, but here, at close quarters,
I study the hand straps in the train car until they look like miniature nooses (this takes 20 minutes)
Watching a room disappear is a form of light exercise
It takes light to wash out the room, the watching
Helps us down the hallway to the sink
Washing the face flattens its chaos
I bend my face to my friends sitting in broken thrones I “let” them borrow
A proper confession makes use of all the furniture
The table is better worshipped from the floor
See how it rises to meet what it holds
I kept my love at that level, where my elbows found resting points
It took a very long time for the need to move to arise
Then I had to wait to be ready to obey
My patient master took my cold hand
Made me write this line to leave this room
To stomach a bunch of bad chatting I won’t be improving upon
Since the worldview must match the paycheck
Genre is for writers so generous that their gift
Speaks for itself and anyone who touches it
But it’s not like form is a hoard
I don’t own it because I use it, this is more like a sketch from a fading memory
That further obscures things
No light would define
Without changing the color set in that surface
The record of the damage inherent to the gift
But it’s pleasant to tan, to become faded or filled
With the gradual decay or slow progress towards explosion, parallels of life and its source
Make a mockery of the dream of sitting still
The lesson of a single injury
Replicated in poorly performed chores
The room in which the notebooks live is noticed
In its profusion of occupants choking out its empty song
All my potential seems to be in that space the shelf is taking up
If I take it to the street to better confront the wall
I might take up sketching and become ill at ease
To learn how poems fit in rooms I must work in many different kinds of rooms

Or save up for an imagination
Purchased in installments sized to prevent an overdose of freedom
That’s no different than oversleeping as an adult
To have less time to choose one’s obligations
I’m just happy the world’s turning
And the edge bends to rest beyond sight
Studying that light makes a few good lifetimes or filler phrases
Words have every right to be empty
If they are caged up in towers and trying to rest in the clouds
Holy and apart
This notebook knows about what can never be
While I stare a long time at what might happen
Waiting for its obverse to prove something obvious
An egg hatches because I was too depressed to take it from the hen
The less of an explanation for a birth there is, the more
Room for the new one to make it up
Which they will only do if someone is following along with interest
I can certainly be or find this person
Since a similar favor was done for me
Over and over and over and over until
I figured I ought to thank everybody by
Making somebody else happy for a while
Any feeling that fits only between two or three people
Looks holy and is safeguarded by
The space that anguished women make and fill
Scrap of a dress scratched out
By a hoarder hoping for an archive
Total focus and constant production
Leaves a man empty, pesky, and fried
Still plenty to respect if you know how to look at it
After all, you take those same eyes home to yourself every night
They must make peace with all four corners in order to close
Tomorrow is a test of generosity
My dollar doesn’t go as far, so my dollar’s less important
What could compel me to compete
As long as the library is inexhaustible and I am only distracting myself
And not spreading happy purpose like a member of a system
My parasitism
Feeds on a temporary agreement between
Concrete reality and imposed structures
Melt like sugar at the touch of a single tear
If only my brain were as open as these windows
Which are never shut even when they seem closed
All night my eyes scan my eyelids
The room captures the season and imposes it upon me
The air is honest about the weather
I forget my methods of deception as I continue to breathe this honest air
Sniffles are tricks played upon me
I make my mucus travel up and down my throat and it never chokes me
I make myself sick in sympathy or fear
To make the days less precious
Drain them of green wonder
And hide from night by drinking streaming colors

Degrees of Departure

Michael Cavuto

I left you on the coast
with dirt beneath
your feet

not walking backwards but forward looking
back over your shoulder
the shoreline

receding having zero resemblances

I was waking or leaving
We had not burned the pine-board
raft the raft was your injunction
to save the possibility
of a ceremony to come

I left you standing on the shore of the beach
with my blind dog who knows
the sound of water

in obstinate heat
done over
so that pattern makes passage
of surface
sunstruck or caustic image

our reflection does not restore us

“From here every direction is shown” we read
the starmap in reverse upon water
upside down W
a letter in the sky made legible

Be cautious of arrows they are one-half
bad omens
one-half unspoken
language’s false currency
the *lingua franca* these “counterfeit angels”

We’ve traded on depletion for centuries
Thieves of some other voice these ledgers of errancy
Star of pitch & salt & spray an end
in resemblance w/ revenance
The city of ballasts a belltower
raised from the highest mast

I left tokens at your feet,

in torchlight in profile
to make manifest this aberrant narrative
Some other resonance that a word formed
as falling air as sand as stone
thrown down the empty space of vibrancy
tunneled and

toned without end within earth

Unmoved
you attempt
to hold the equivalent width of worship open

The signal flares How we knew when to harbor

glare swallows your voice
now I navigate a gaping mouth
the throat we put a candle
back there hung from a collar of bronze

voice of no sound confounding shadows
hermit’s grayglint eyes

crown of ()horns / hoofbeats and haloes
“(now after always a light)”

This as we know is a most honorable sentence
after the gods were all killed & the poets

renamed you love

The Way it Seems to

Annabel Lee

everyone’s saying
hayng takes time
from the bow of an earthship gliding
so down the rows a curvy elliptical hanging band of thread stalks
bags rolls square bales heaping up
okay
she needs to be around a lot of animals at one time
her dogs hunting
my cats hiding in cardboard boxes
you taking memories to go
deer and raccoons snacking on leftover bits in the wild places
mother child strangely peeling off in a different sad brokedown Jeep
on a tear on the racecourse of Sunday’s grueling events
the little darling
wears a string of Russian amber
placing red rainboots on the running board
then leaps into the baler cab manure smells wafting
with the raggedy seats fuming
for like hours the hayng the hay
closer

Cento after Bernadette

Vani Natarajan

gossip is the queer archive
brown girl on the floor of the world
you called, so now I'll live a hundred more years
the heart wants what it wants
8 strawberries in a wet blue bowl
how is your heart
baby baby baby baby baby
at the end of my suffering, there was a door
I'll go and come back
it is complicated, both can be true
I stop to see a weeping willow
I am not nostalgic
to never get used to the unspeakable violence
to study the self
complex personhood
I like to dress up to visit the dead
do you sweat when you write?
don't you ever get a curiosity

Jose Muñoz, maybe paraphrased
Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*
my mother
mid-Manhattan therapist
Solmaz Sharif, "Vulnerability Study"
various friends
assorted singers/lovers
Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris*
Tamil leavetaking phrase, translated
mostly everyone
Patsy Cline, "Walking After Midnight"
Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*
Arundhati Roy, *Cost of Living*
Dogen, as shared by Ryan Wong
Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*
sweet crust punk, West Philly ca2003
Ntozake Shange
Slant 6, "Don't You Ever?"

Toast

Jennifer Firestone

I can't spread the butter on the toast and I can't sleep.
How do people mash a yellow square into gold?
I have the wrong bread, the wrong knife.
The square is irrefutable.
It's like the wedge that keeps my door ajar, noises wafting.
What? I'm busy I'm spreading.
I hate squares, that's what we call them, the conventionals,
those that need to be perfect and set images aglow.
I'm absolutely exhausted. My robe is dim yellow.
The lights are dulling though the sun aches.
I'm telling off a fat slab of oil, *get busy, go.*
It's a smear campaign. Maybe because I bought wheat.
I stayed away from the nuts, the little bits of grain.
But the meadow wasn't sowed correctly.
The belly of it breaks before it disintegrates.
Okay, you win. I'll eat a chunk of you in flour.
I'll wear you on my smile.
I could have just used jam, I could have eaten fruit.
I could rip apart a box of flakes.
I can be so simple,
to sit basked in flowers and light, and pat you,
radiant one.

The Way to Keep

Noa Mendoza

On the edge of winter, a walnut tree.
Cracked smile of nut, gutted sky. I'll find surprise in it.

Our heat is broke again, as genre. Friends gathered here, in our cold home,
wanting no more. We ate our rice and wine. Slept after eating.

The city, a barge this morning. Your face
beveled the bed. Sleep light. I'll find surprise in it.

They named me something soft. I use it to tell the season.
Take on. Leave again. Welcome, Ayaz.

A hymn for your weather. New n' not yet tired.
I'll surprise it.

Eggy week, I've stopped paying attention.
How extendible that feral doing work does.

The week fat beyond belief.
How happy though, to belief!

We thought spring would come: it's cracking.
Zemirot! Bite!

I'm no good at shouting. I'd like to like to say again but
I must walk home.

I open the front door. The living room—
friends gutted it.

I know those shoes've fallen in the doorway,
some are mine.

All day the cat waits for us. Grieving her scattered,
prosey color.

We will all be right. It's hotter,
orbs on this orb marooning again.

Whether we know, we knew not,
but now know.

Look at that child come home from school.
He's graceful.

He stops me at the door, introduces himself.
Although I was afraid, I am older now, so now know.

The sweetness of the orb must turn. I've left
Surprise. I find it here.

From inside, I bring a sugared thing out,
The child skips back home.

It's still light out
The door cracking open.

Hovels and Diagrams

Rachel Allen

In the garden is a poem without time, without accretion, without unsorted artifacts or small
containers.

There is a poem with no witnesses and of no accounts. It was Monday I knew this, from the
archaeology
of bedroom

Who damned me to my own belongings?

image of a whale barnacle once about structure
once on a wall
 it's a jurassic eye now,
 not not-labial, & part of the crush
denim and vellum embarrassments of ribbon

I sleep
Walk the slurry of primordial fiber
Fight two convictions
Need no objects / save them all
Try to clear a path

Every thing is thing'ed again
Every day is Easter, especially Easter

Feral cats walk the wall and no I would not prefer the garden
But what is it one owes their lizard innards?
I'm ruled by reptiles who won't let go

Let me tell you:
I'd pay a little price
for a little lenience

Ionization
Yaz Lancaster

I want to occupy your mind
more or less like an anime
time suspended where
thought & memory
are woven—

*show me a flashback hyper-
focus on a bead of sweat
every microscopic tenderness
where you lived as a child
your grief haloed
mother
&*

When I taught the song
I sang the rhythm for you
it went just like *this* & your
voice caught on like a comet
tail & our heads
nodded up down up down together

Occasionally I confuse memories with dreams

Like you’ve definitely grown
wings flown down to pick me up
the night of the pink moon devouring
the city wielding several swords
unsheathed & shimmering with lethal
crushing

Apparently I confuse memories with dreams

I saw an x-ray of what it looks like when you rub your eyeball from a doctor saying
this is why you should never rub your eyeball but man I’ve always been such a big fan
of seeing stars

excerpt from Long Poem
Jo Barchi

Thank you. Don’t forget then but can you come grocery shopping
with me?

They are setting precedents for your commitment. I was not being done in photo spaces.

Do you wanna salt the sidewalk in front of the shop?

young and foolish.

I know the building is supposed to do it,

Any indefinite leave of absence or We just need to know how
many you need and what height to upload these before tomorrow!

Did you just take

a shit at this party? It’s so good

It cost \$800, Sorry you aren’t feeling well.

We never hungout again.

You’ve heard the phrase There’s nothing gay about hell.

He’s talking to me like I’m half a fag. I want you to be president of the
union.

Would you accept a client if you were constantly worried about him

touching you or breathing on you?

That’s all that matters!

She doesn’t seem like a sexual person. I’ll give it another try, but my mic’s
dead.

Laynie Browne

This blank—no you can't talk yourself
Out—instead embrace the calamity of love

Mohammed Zenia Siddiq Yusef Ibrahim

Dream Mar. 12

A building on flame
A live cop standing over the body of a dead one
Supuaround3d by a throng
A bomb or a firework handheld bewilderment it
Could be a beer.
A house with old friends who are no longer friends
It occurs to you/me-
everything is on fire

everything is on fire

This is neither memory or dream fate bears witness birds
Nothing is owed but now. People are dead.

A reflection of yourself at its worse in the mirror atmosphere
Dead moth smolder as eyelids held
Stapled body
who is haloed gold like a vision?

Saint Teresa whispers

We grey husk
 helium sentiments
 & Ticonderoga cask over the oven tongue
 skull

Between going one
Side or the
Other
Understood as
Time-----movement
Without the semblance
Of time. Cicadas wake a million
gods [think]
I walk 3 blocks (NE) Newark
2 blocks underground
2 blocks Qns. To scrap home.

5 blocks U district Korean
Seattle
20 min 1-5
overpass grins
ominous reverie over
the city
subway '3 blocks Bx
via Manhattan

Once while getting a ride to
 Work we cross
 express way bridge
 Trumps golfcourse cornering
 Th eastern tip
 Glows ever dirt gin evil like
 Brontë's cursed moors

Two Films, Some Dreams, and an Old Friend

Ry Dunn

Something I like about art is
not always itself it is
the making an event of it
the event or, that is— the connection.
The art becomes a stage for friendship
meaning making, a confluence.
art is an excuse to see an old friend
I want to take you on a date
I met becca at the anthology of films
to see *she must be seeing things*
in the opening scene the camera pans
across the kitchen around Agatha
(played by Sheila Dabney)
giving dimension to her character
in an ominous + foreboding way.
the story features different angles to witness,
and sure enough.
Agatha is a strong willed woman
tortured by her own lust for clues
enraptured by the paranoia that ensues.
The paranoia about my gender.
The fear of a lover's past.
I built these walls to protect me.
The fateful day when it all comes crashing down.
I had to learn to forgive myself.
The theater said no food but my hunger said
buy two slices of pizza from the pizzeria,
Becca brought in an Earl Grey “blondie,”
it's like a brownie.
Something I love about Becca is
her devotion to baked goods.
Even the gross ones I once associated with
a Love's service plaza on I-40 in the high desert.
She wore these baggy pants and said
I told her to buy flood pants.
I had to look down to register
having never heard of flood pants
I couldn't recall ever telling her to buy them
But I shrugged it off, after all they looked great.
She took a shot of me and my pizza
in that boomerang style and later I watched myself
thinking that's what I look like.
It's like I need a mirror to reflect
back to me and that's why I have friends after all.
That and having a great reason to enjoy art.

I wake up inside my sleep and
It's not always the dream that
Caters to the moments of ease
Comforting though the waves in there
Blue reflection of heaven
It was a sunny day we were
on a boat and he was there
wearing all black but also he
was wearing athletic shorts over
Black leggings which was very
Forest punk of him to incarnate
my years in the Pacific West
burning juniper and smoking
headband, birthday cake, green crack
He told a story about a thing he
fixed a thing or maybe he was just
there to help us and My dream
my dream was full of sunlight
the warm comfort of connection
connection to each other by way
of whatever objects were
maybe that's what Marx inferred after all
this bizarre way my crush on a man
Is somehow mediated by an object in my
dream I can't for the life of me remember
let's assume now, there were whales
off the boat was the ocean
magnificent blue hue
the architect of my emotional landscape
when we watched the movie zoo
about a man whose lust for sensation
stretches beyond his corporeality
this wasn't a dream but it was shot like one
and I often dream of animals although
I'm never fucking them
The whale, in absentia, was thought to
float out in the periphery
once I dreamt that Alex and I
were swimming with whales
and I often dream of my
dog running, bound for the horizon
as I scurry for a leash or any solution
my fear of death in direct opposition
to his expression of freedom and joy
is he the man of my dreams or

In Response to Emi

Kirby Chen Mages

I saw the poem
in sky blue binding
in birdsong and sounds
of lawnmowers too
the difference between downtime
v. down time

I saw the poem
in a bitten nail
a washed hand
the prismatic light
on the page of the E.D. poem
titled *Griefs*

I saw the poem
in the poem
like the time
Kwony was crying
then she was laughing
as I whispered in her ear:
The point of poetry
is the point of poetry

we called it *Perfect Poem*
(or *P of P*)
A memory
especially sweet to me
my mouth so close
to her ear

My Healthfirst Doesn't Cover Therapy?

Meagan Washington

is there a such thing as a knee coma?

i fear someone hit snooze on my joints?

(there is a such thing as kidney ache.)

what's the cure for technology?

maybe an undisclosed beach where the waves cry into my asterisk palms?

or regression?

how about a city cure?

could i place sunflowers on my eyelids in a field where the roots sprout from the soil & believe desire is a contact sport so they coil around my ankles?

would i need an operation?

is it separation that pastes pain into the body?

i mean, if the cure for a clogged artery is blowing a balloon into a patient's veins then joy is a cure, right?

—but i have a fear of clowns & children's birthday parties & children.

whose sadness am i eating?

haven't i already ingested what was on my plate? (the hunger in my knees looks like a curtsy from a distance.)

i can't stop getting older?

lately, i've been feeling devious:

saying hello to strangers, singing in school hallways, being nice to men, how do i cure kindness?

is solipsism the answer? (seems too easy.)

should i make a doctor's appointment

or wait for my feelings to completely erode? (please don't tell me eating animals has filled me with death.)

(i'm so full of vegetation, & guilt.)

(a sparrow builds a nest on my fire escape & inhabits my world with penetrable black eyes.) if it is the birds that are going extinct then why are all the men whistling?

(i press a finger into my chest. feel for the tenderness i carry.)

the world won't adopt me as a lover? i'm not coping well?

is it considered codependence if it's— the world?

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