

The Inhuman Art of Dying vs. Poetry's Grief Police (March 2012)

The Minnesota State Arts Board recently rejected a grant proposal I wrote for the manuscript I'm finishing about the alligator attack that led to the death of a close friend of mine (I've written about this project [here](#)). The offensive yet illuminating thing about this rejection is that I got to hear an audio file of the judges discussing my work. I was offended not because the judges questioned my abilities as a poet. Aside from my ego suffering a few bruises, I could've probably handled a standard critique given that I'm a lowly MFA student still fresh from the workshop. What the judges mostly assessed, instead, was the moral status of my project. They objected to various aspects of the poetry—including its violence, melodrama, and “cartoonish[ness]”—and accused me of appropriating my friend's death the way corporate media did. They wanted a “cooler treatment” of the subject matter.

What bothered the judges above all was my focus on the spectacular circumstances of my friend's death, and the fact that the manuscript thematically orbits around the attack itself. One panelist called my “energetic” relationship with the gator outright “inappropriate.” Another suggested that the poems, by failing to adequately acquaint the reader with my friend, lacked a sense of grief:

It's not just the science that's lacking, the grief is lacking. And I think he's being mastered a bit by his own subject. Maybe a little bit by ambition, although maybe that's a dangerous supposition to make, but yeah, let's hear about this woman, the relationship, and the grief, and then you can tell me about alligators.

At first I took this criticism to be simply another example of the extreme bias in US literary culture toward humanist authenticity and interiority; the judges made no mention of a “speaker” performed by the poet, as if there were no room in elegies for the use of a persona. I've been thinking, though, that the judges' criticisms have broader implications. Without dwelling too much on my manuscript, I want to highlight the politics of grief that inform prescriptive comments like the ones above, a politics Judith Butler writes about beautifully in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* :

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very “I” who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very “I” is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.

Butler's words, I think, are just as much a description of writing from states of grief, desire, violence, and vulnerability as they are an account of grief. This is going to sound like *Montevideo 101*, but I think it's worth repeating that by writing, we lose control of our narratives, and inevitably end up thwarting not just our intentions for a poem, but also the way we conceive of ourselves and our bodies as bounded, autonomous entities shaped through free will. Butler elaborates: "Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned."

To insist otherwise, in this sense, and refuse to be mastered by one's subject (as per the judges' diagnosis of me) would be to deny how "passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not are own, irreversibly, if not fatally." Butler argues that such policing of grief determines not only whom we can grieve for, but also which lives are considered worth grieving for, which lives get to be called human. Americans are thus forbidden to mourn for Iraqi war victims in the media insofar as these victims are, and must be, considered expendably subhuman.

I want to stretch Butler's point here because I think we should be allowed to grieve for whatever forms of life command our longing--including the nonhuman ecologies we're killing and the species that inhabit them. I want to say that it's unethical not to grieve for, and try to somehow access, any needless death. I want to create art in which even I, as the artist, can die and become something else in the midst of my obscene adornment. Like Candy Darling on her deathbed, or Alice Notley in all her unruly works of mourning, or David Wojnarowicz with his censored visuals, I want to create an art of dying that petals and bejewels the body threatened or in decay, that makes the body contiguous with the poem. An art of dying that does not restrain itself according to what falls within the slippery category of the human, much less what it is humans think is permissible to grieve or how "authentic" grieving is done. It is because I do not know what grief brings that it transforms me into a bird, into a bullet, into a tuberous root in the ground.

Ecologies of Sensation: The Book(s) of Bhanu Kapil and Clarice Lispector (February 2012)

"The mask is what you use; it isn't a fake, it's a mask. Your senses love you; they evolved to be your mask--or you made them, didn't you?" -Alice Notley, *Culture of One*

Lately, I've been compelled to regard books as pulsating organisms with ecologies and becomings of their own. If once the book struck me as an intermediary technology between writers, their subjects, readers, and God, I now often get the feeling that these figures orbit the book. This is to say that I think a book creates and undoes its own material boundaries. Through sensation, a book may animate another's body, or take on mythic, mystic, otherworldly proportions; it may stand in, like scripture, for all books and words at a given point in time; or it may do none of these things. Whether the book fails or succeeds in its trajectory or finds unexpected lines of flight, it's always capable of more (more, more) futures than we can anticipate.

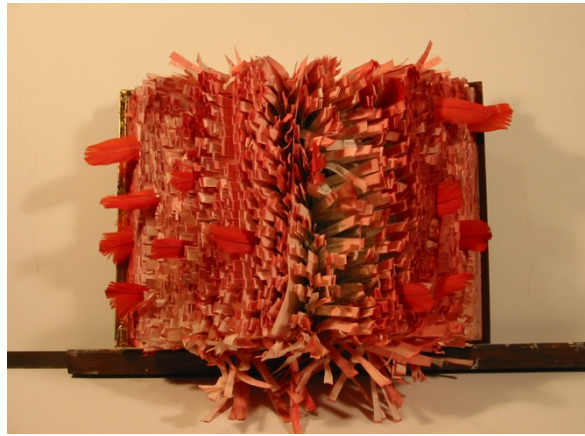
As in Amit Rai's concept of ecologies of sensation, my version/vision of the book situates it in multiple timespaces: the book is "an event that performs anew with each repetition and with each new scene of circulation [...] an unpredictable but patterned trajectory of present conforming to past but open to future mutations." A happy accident in my Intermediate Poetry class last term confirmed the book's event-like unpredictability. Months before its publication, I'd assigned Bhanu Kapil's *Schizophrene*. When my copy came in the mail, I saw that it reset and repeated itself after the first 20 pages. In fact, my occult copy embodied Bhanu's description of its "arcing once more through the crisp dark air;" it stuttered with a blunt physical force not unlike "a *schizophrenic narrative* [that] cannot process the dynamic elements of an image, any image." Even the page with publication details insisted on reproducing itself, exploding the narrative over and beyond the table of contents that traditionally delimit it.

"On the *night* I knew my book *had failed*, I threw it." I love how, by thwarting its author's intentions, the corrected copy of *Schizophrene* also sketches its own body, "a hunk of electromagnetic fur torn from the side of something still living and thrown." A body that itself becomes indistinguishable from one of the book's 'human' subjects later on: "Can you smell her burning fur?"

Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* enacts a porosity so total, for me, that it seems to inhabit yet diverge from the same ecology of sensations. It is, as in Edmond Jabes' lifelong conversation with the page, an evolution of *the book*, the event that both repeats and alters itself through unforeseeable futures.

In light of how brilliantly this novella of 85 pgs ponders and violates received ideas about writing the other (much like *Schizophrene*), I don't know why it isn't more widely read outside Brazil. It's seriously one of my favorite books of all time! Maybe, by refusing its finiteness as an object, *The Hour of the Star* disobeys too many unspoken rules. Because

no word in Lispector's novella is able to circumscribe itself and merely point to its referents, the narrative has enough power to actually kill off its fictional author--a male stand-in for Lispector--at the same time as its female protagonist, the ill-fated Macabéa. I was going to say that it 'earns' or 'gains' this power, but that's not really true--right on the second page "to feel" becomes "a fact." Instead of undercutting the book's authority in a typically postmodern strategy, the metatext sets off an overwhelming sensorial overflow: the author admits to following an "occult fatal line" when Macabéa becomes real enough to "whisper" and "breathe" into him. She is the book-as-event, both untimely enunciation and aborted Annunciation, some kind of murderous virginal angel who also makes us fly and die inside her, as any star should.



The Echo of the Face in Raúl Zurita and Fever Ray (September 2011)

Coincidentally, I've also been interfacing with our beloved Zurita. Until someone sends me [his 745-page opus published in Chile this year](#), or until he shows up at the local glassy poetry complex, I'm rereading *INRI* (trans. William Rowe, Marick Press). The book--titled after the inscription on Jesus' crucifix--begins with a preface recalling President Ricardo Lagos' absurd acknowledgment in as late as 2001 of the bodies disappeared during Chile's dictatorship. Describing his shame in witnessing this on TV, Zurita writes:

"No, it wasn't 'moral outrage' or any other high-sounding phrase, it was something much more concrete and unspoken: it was like a screech I couldn't get away from, that I may never be able to pull myself away from. The book was called *INRI*, and it came out of the image of a man who was uttering strange words on the TV. I don't know if what I am saying about the screech makes sense: it was called innrrrrriiiiiiiiiiii."

As a "concrete and unspoken" event, the screech that Zurita intuits in the televisual image echoes beyond language as we 'know' it. Both gasping void and stuttering, overwhelming flow, the screech is a religious, multisensory intensity that the book materializes when it offers passages in Braille to be touched rather than seen. *INRI* thus disorients us into a blindness once brutally experienced by Chileans: "There was also a detail, another fact about that crucifixion: one of the reports tells how before killing their victims the military personnel gouged out their eyes with hooks..."

Because it handicaps itself, leading us through Chilean landscapes as if they were unrecognizable to the eye, Zurita's poetry reminds me of the much-discussed appearance by Karin Dreijer Andersson, aka Fever Ray, at a Swedish awards show:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymCP6zC_qJU

Fever Ray's disfigured face not only mirrors Zurita's own self-mutilation, whereby the poet threw ammonia on his eyes and burned his cheek in response to state-sanctioned torture; her appearance also strangely repurposes the screech of *INRI* for a glittery awards ceremony. To consider [the blogosphere consensus](#) that the cosmetic effect was meant to address women's [acid scarification](#) in predominantly Muslim countries, then, is to retrace this nonverbal utterance as repetition, reverberation, and return. It is to notice how ferociously a sacred cry traverses identities. Invoking the Chilean people and landscape, as well as Jesus Christ through the poet, the cry also channels Muslim women in a European woman's white face. If language is what makes us human, even the slippery ontology of species is broken down, and consumed, by an incomprehensible Fever Ray. "Stones cry out" in *INRI*, but who or what is this being behind the microphone?

Cohering through a range of senses despite eluding language, the open-mouthed faces of Zurita and Fever Ray present a cut of difference, of bodily specificity, that nevertheless finds common ground. Facing us and therefore each other, the poet and musician open

thresholds of contact that are neither totally legible nor absolutely other. Both artists at once 'lose' and 'save' face by making all-consuming art out of degradation. Art fulfills its [convivial potential](#) when these faces irrationally compel us to live with them, to be like them insofar as we, too, become blind, mute, scarred, dead, alive, vulnerable (again and again) in unpredictable ways:

"In the same way that the stones speak, that the earth speaks, I speak to you. And the blindness of my fingers speaks to you as they feel their way over your skull, your nose, your eye sockets, and the infinite sky has collapsed and speaks rising out of the worm-infested sockets of your eyes. And like a landscape of earth rising with the earth our faces start to rise up out of our dead faces and then, as the stones speak, as the earth speaks, I speak to you, corpse of me, love of me, bones of me, small round pupil of all the love that rises and is the song of your eyes looking at me.

I can see you!"

-Zurita, *INRI*, p. 119.

Confessionalism and Horse Fucking in the Necropastoral of Louise Glück, "Equus," and Enumclaw, Washington

For my [third annual](#) post on art and the animal, I'm going to explore the moist, shadowy field where two taboos collide. Bestiality (actual and representational) and Confessionalism (poetic, Catholic, psychiatric, juridical) have been on my mind lately.

My thinking begins with Louise Glück's "Horse," a poem that briefly riffs on the trope of young women's attraction to horses:

What does the horse give you
That I cannot give you?

I watch you when you are alone,
When you ride into the field behind the dairy,
Your hands buried in the mare's
Dark mane.

Then I know what lies behind your silence:
Scorn, hatred of me, of marriage. Still,
You want me to touch you; you cry out
As brides cry, but when I look at you I see
There are no children in your body.
Then what is there?

Nothing, I think. Only haste
To die before I die.

In a dream, I watched you ride the horse
Over the dry fields and then
Dismount: you two walked together;
In the dark, you had no shadows.
But I felt them coming toward me
Since at night they go anywhere,
They are their own masters.

Look at me. You think I don't understand?
What is the animal
If not passage out of this life?

By ending with a tidy epiphany, "Horse" seems to restrain itself like any quietist or confessionalist poem. Contrary to the aims of a proper avant-garde, the poem forces closure and self-enlightenment; its ending only thinly disguises a confession framed as

universal truth. In the speaker's rhetorical questions, the animal as Death and only Death ('passage out of this life') reads more like an assertion than a suggestion, a light beaming down from the poet godhead above us.

But what, in this flickering, depressed poem, does it mean to pass out of this life?

What is the 'Nothing' in the deathly bodies inscribed?

What is "Horse" if not a trot through the Necropastoral, where the unthinkable lurks in and leaks from every threshold?

Where everything, even and especially that nonreproductive 'Nothing' and 'haste to die,' becomes a threshold?

If Gluck responds austerely to the ego-centered trivialisms of Confessionalism, Peter Schaffer's play "Equus" amplifies the confessional injunctions of religion, law, and psychoanalysis beyond their aims. The play centers on the horse worship of Alan Strang, a troubled teenager whose theological desires make him a hard nut to crack even on the analyst's couch.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl-MgaVCUy0&feature=related>

We learn in the beginning of the play (or movie, now streaming on Netflix!) that Alan has violently blinded horses in the stable where he works. Because no one can figure out why, it becomes the job of his analyst to suss out the truth, if not produce it. As Foucault pointed out, "*Western man has become a confessing animal.*" Institutions like science/medicine and law have thus adopted the confessional from the religious sphere as a way to enforce authority. This is especially the case with deviant sexuality, which is just as much regulated as it is incited by the powers that be:

"At issue is not a movement bent on pushing rude sex back into some obscure and inaccessible region, but on the contrary, a process that spreads it over the surface of things and bodies, arouses it, draws it out and bids it to speak, implants it in reality and enjoins it to tell the truth: an entire glittering sexual array..."

The threat of Alan Strang, in this sense, is that he restores Confessionalism to sublime heights, where the spread of eros takes on inhuman dimensions. As the play illustrates his confessions, it follows the horse where Gluck's poem fades out: Alan rejects heterosexual fucking and replaces a portrait of Christ on his bedroom wall with one of the horse-god he calls Equus. The teenager submits to a worship that is a kind of death, a murder of the secular individualism to which most confessionalists cling. As [Mark Doty states](#) in a conversation about Lowell, "There is a huge difference between the search for insight and the desire to be forgiven." While Doty sides with the psychoanalytic pursuit of insight,

"Equus" half-heartedly entertains a Freudian explanation for Alan's deviancy. His ritual and sacrifice, rather than his relationship with Mom or Dad or any woman or man, become the scene and not the root of a gorgeous, impenetrable spectacle at the very limit of our understanding. A limit where what is said must remain unfathomable, eluding all rationale in its aberrant grandeur.

Alan's is a mutant confessionism. Catharsis heals him while also transforming his analyst, who confesses to wanting to be like Alan, or worse, becoming the horse he mounts on erotic midnight rides:

I keep thinking about the *horse!* Not the boy: the horse, and what it may be trying to do. I keep seeing that huge head kissing him with its chained mouth. Nudging through the metal some desire absolutely irrelevant to filling its belly or propagating its own kind. What desire could that be? . . . You see, I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling. All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only suspect is there.

Tragically, it's not the fictional teenager of "Equus" whose bestiality literalized Gluck's mention of fatal passage, but an existing person. In 2005 Kenneth Pinyan, a member of a zoophilic community in Enumclaw, Washington died from a perforated colon after being fucked by a stallion. According to reports, Pinyan refused to seek medical attention because of the unusual nature of his internal injury. In light of sexual norms, needless to say, he could not confess to his own penetration by an animal. And yet the truth, once bled out of him, spread. Pinyan's alternative to confession was a hastened death whose obscenity was promptly declared and codified (the state of Washington had no anti-beastiality laws prior to the case). He was declared dead upon arrival at the ER, where a friend from the same zoophilic community anonymously left him.

For me, Pinyan's silence resonates as the ultimate threshold in this equine entanglement of art and bodies. No longer a self-determined human subject, I am annihilated through my affinity with him, turned into a masterless shadow his body nevertheless casts. Just as Alan elicits from his analyst a monstrous sympathy, Pinyan's death commands my own inhuman confession--words with the force if not the content of his secret, a visionary, epiphanic, necessarily destructive Nothing I couldn't name if I tried.