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**THE FUTURE UNITES US:  
A GAY POETICS OF SAN FRANCISCO**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

**Eric Sneathen**

September 2022

The Dissertation of Eric Sneathen is  
approved:

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Abstract  
The Future Unites Us: A Gay Poetics of San Francisco  
Eric Sneathen

Since at least the publication of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, postwar poetry in the United States has been heavily influenced by queer writers. However, the various traditions and lineages that comprise twentieth-century queer writing traditions have not always been appreciated in their moment or in the decades following due to, on the one hand, censorship and institutionalized homophobia, and, on the other, code-switching and self-obfuscation. Debates about the role of poetic speech and speech's relationship to identity articulated in the late 1970's further devalued the kinds of political poetics of marginalized groups, including queer writers, as well as women and writers of color. Though queer writers were active in the activism in the challenges that eventually brought gay and lesbian studies—and later queer theory and queer studies—to university campuses, queer theory's primary interest in novels has meant that queer poetics has yet to be appropriately reconsidered.

Focused on the San Francisco Bay Area, this dissertation draws from a number of archival holdings to reconstruct a history of queer poetics stretching from the emergence of a self-consciously American modernism in the 1950's to the second decade of the twenty-first century, in the midst of a resurgence of anti-capitalist longing decades after the worst of the AIDS epidemic in North America. The dissertation begins with two chapters of literary criticism: the first dedicated to the

life and works of editor Donald Allen, the second to the prolific multi-hyphenate, Kevin Killian. Complementing these more traditional chapters of literary criticism are two poetry manuscripts: *Minor Work* and *Don't Leave Me This Way*. These manuscripts extend the concerns of the literary criticism regarding location, lyric speech, and historical feeling, in addition to drawing on archival research. Taken together, these chapters suggest some of the deficiencies in contemporary queer studies and literary history, which have yet to fully account for the lives and works of marginalized poets, even those who should be seen as essential to their composition.

## Dedication

I give my deepest thanks to the innumerable people far and wide—queers, poets, scholars, otherwise— who have made this work possible. Perhaps this is the “Love Music” Robert Glück wrote about,

While you're here I'm myself  
but in your absence I become like you  
while you become like me  
and the future unites us  
first the idea of the future  
then the idea of the future  
and the music moves so slowly

## The Prince of Calumny: An Introduction

It was February 4, 2019 when I received an email from Winston Leyland, the legendary editor who had done so much in the name of Gay Liberation through his San Francisco-based publications, the nationally distributed newspaper *Gay Sunshine* and its offshoots, Gay Sunshine Press and Leyland Publications. Robert Dewhurst has written about the significance of *Gay Sunshine*, “While only one outpost on an entire network of fugitive ‘radical movement’ rags that appeared in the immediate wake of the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, *Gay Sunshine* would make, over the course of its decade-long run, a uniquely visionary contribution to both queer and print culture and American literary history-at-large—and one that has yet to be critically documented” (213). Recalling the poet Jack Spicer’s words, that a “magazine is a society,” Dewhurst goes on to identify *Gay Sunshine* as a precedent for the kind of literary communities constellating around later influential periodicals including “Dennis Cooper’s *Little Caesar* (Los Angeles, 1976-82) and [Steve] Abbott’s *Soup* (San Francisco, 1980-85), and are visible today in contemporary lit-sex zines, such as Hedi El Kholi’s *Animal Shelter* (Los Angeles, 2008-) and Evan Kennedy’s *The Swan’s Dirty Rag* (San Francisco, 2010-)” (231).

What an honor, I thought, to be sought out by the illustrious Leyland, whose labors had done so much to support those gay writers at the margins—the margins of the margins, truly—who would eventually combine their talents and experiences into the provocative admixture now known as New Narrative. Yes, I’d heard a rumor or



two about Leyland, so my expectations were somewhat tempered, but I felt rather unprepared for what I read that day:

Dear Eric Sneathen,

For information on me you can consult [www.leylandpublications.com/article\\_leyland.html](http://www.leylandpublications.com/article_leyland.html). My Gay Sunshine/Leyland website is still up for historical reasons, but it only includes part (50% or so) of what I actually published 1970-2002. I can hardly be pleased at the potpourri of calumny, part truths and often malicious gossip which you spread over the net after the presentation at the SF Museum of Modern Art (to which I was not invited even though you apparently have my email). So I am now supposed to be a bishop, eh? Sure have risen in the world! If you are writing a Ph.D. it should not be based mainly on the opinions of two or three people who were marginal to gay writing in the 1970s but have now somehow magically become major. I do not wish to re-assess the gay politics of 38 to 48 years ago (1970-1980) and so will not answer by email any further questions. The 200 or so books and journal I published from the 1970 up until early this century are in major libraries so you can consult them there. My wikipedia page is also on the net under my name with a further link (under external) to a in-depth article by a gay writer and published in a gay newspaper. I do deserve my good name and reputation.

In queer liberation,

Winston Leyland

Leyland's email arrived as something of an anachronism, a belated response to a series of essays and interviews I had co-produced for the San Francisco of Modern Art Museum's now-defunct *Open Space*. The series—*Life Blasted Open*—was first published online in June and July of 2018. It was a coda, of sorts, to *Communal Presence*, the conference I had co-organized the previous Fall to celebrate the publication of two recent collections of New Narrative writings: Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Kil-

lian's anthology of original New Narrative texts, *Writers Who Love Too Much* (2017), and Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw's critical essay collection *From Our Hearts to Yours* (2017). Along with the recent publication of Bellamy's *When the Sick Rule the World* (2015) and Glück's *Communal Nude* (2016), these anthologies signaled an inflection point for the legitimization of New Narrative. "At last a major anthology of New Narrative," the back copy of *Writers Who Love Too Much* proclaims, "the movement fueled by punk, pop, porn, French theory, and social struggle to change writing forever." But if people as knowledgeable as Winston Leyland were skeptical about the significance of New Narrative, what could be made of this new-found purchase on legitimacy? Clearly, New Narrative had a savvy marketing team behind it, but was there something else?

As Glück's "Long Note on New Narrative" suggests, New Narrative's "heroic period" was well behind it. The history of New Narrative is generally recognized to begin in San Francisco in 1979, with the first publications of Boone and Glück's small press Black Star Series, Boone's *My Walk With Bob* and Glück's *Family Poems*. A quick summary of Glück's "Long Note" would make sure to mention that Boone and Glück intended to invent a literature that struggled to achieve a double critique—"a third position that would compass the whole argument"—a new literature that could respond to the "luxurious idealism" of the then-ascendant Language poets as well as the commodification of gay identity that was all too quickly becoming "just another nationalism" (14-15). Around the same time as these books were published,

Boone and Glück were leading state-funded writing workshops in the backroom of Small Press Traffic, a local bookstore dedicated to small press literature, and, not long after, Abbott and Boone convened the Left/Write conference with the purpose of organizing writers associated with a diversity of social movements.

The difference between Glück's "Long Note" and the copy on the back of *Writers Who Love Too Much* seems rather incongruous without the additional context of the decades that followed the launch of the Black Star Series. What the founders of New Narrative did not foresee were the long years of the AIDS epidemic, the boom and bust of queer publishing, nor the effects of widespread neoliberalism on the local and global networks that promoted marginal, experimental, and small press publishing. These were years of radical change that had compounding effects for New Narrative, whether New Narrative is understood as a community of writers, a set of aesthetic principles, a body of texts, or some hybrid beyond definition. At the point when Glück first published his "Long Note on New Narrative" in 2001, his community had been devastated by two decades of losses. Though it is infrequently cited explicitly, this loss hangs over Glück's history, which concludes meekly, "In using the tag New Narrative, I concede there is such a thing. In the past I was reluctant to promote a literary school that endured even ten minutes, much less a few years. Bruce and I took the notion of a 'school' half seriously, and once New Narrative began to resemble a program, we abandoned it, declining to recognize ourselves in the tyrants and functionaries that make a literary school. Or was it just a failure of nerve?" (24). This con-

cession is significant for illuminating a key aspect of New Narrative: it may have scorned the “luxurious idealism” of the Language poets, but it was an idealist project all its own.

In 2001, more than thirty years after the launch of their Black Star Series, after many New Narrative writers had died and while so many New Narrative writers continued to struggle to publish their books and keep them in print, Glück’s “Long Note” asserted New Narrative by fiat. In 2017, the *Communal Presence* conference made the same concession. And though literary history has yet to fully describe what New Narrative was or might have been, who was involved, their motives, innovations and failures, a community of readers, writers, and publishers, enthusiasts, critics, and scholars, *had* formed a coalition, however unintentionally and provisionally. Finally, it could be said that a tradition of New Narrative had passed across the threshold of legitimacy.

It’s not a surprise that Winston Leyland, having long departed from publishing and the San Francisco Bay Area, was unaware that such a threshold had been surpassed. And, while I was disappointed by Leyland’s email, I was also a bit proud of myself for having provoked some kind of response. Like the student of New Narrative that I had become (i.e., a lover of gossip), I immediately forwarded the email to Kevin Killian. His response was encouraging,

Oh my! But you knew this much going in. In a way he’s no worse than someone like Bruce, an old queen defending his turf and his place in

history in the name (as he reminds you) of “queer liberation.” Still I feel for you; I guess you’re gonna have to “write around” him.

(I always admired his name, “Winston Leyland”—exactly the name that someone like Firbank might have dreamed up to connote exactly the sort of creature Leyland became.)

xxxx Kevin

Not everyone has the opportunity to be as close to their research as I have been, to be sent letters from authors signed with the genial flirtation of four x’s. But this is how I’ve come to know New Narrative: on a first name basis. In the months that followed Leyland’s letter, I was giddy to tell my story to Bob (Robert Glück) and Bruce (Boone), for example, though I misremembered a key detail. Though no epithets had been hurled at me, I misremembered the point; I thought Winston Leyland had dubbed me the Prince of Calumny, a title I *adored* for its antiquatedness and grandeur. True to nature of Leyland’s response, if not the letter, being called the Prince of Calumny felt completely out of proportion to the modest reach of *Life Blasted Open*. Blessed by no less than a bishop, I had become a royal.

It was also a title I held privately with a bit of self-recognition—for I had, certainly, misrepresented New Narrative from time to time. New Narrative had already been dedicated to its self-mythology for decades by the time I arrived to do my work as a literary historian. A kind of parody of Robert Duncan’s mythopoetics, New Narrative’s self-aggrandizement and self-promotion was both a serious counter to the theory-heavy poetics of the Language poetics and a half-serious play for legitimacy,

whatever that might mean for queer writers in the world of small press experimental literature in the late twentieth century. In 1990, at the first OutWrite conference, Dodie introduced a panel dedicated to New Narrative, sprinkling in quotes from the group's favorite literary philosophers—a statement of principles distinct from Bob's more influential "Long Note on New Narrative." Listening to the copy of the audio cassette recording housed at the GLBT Historical Society, I couldn't make out most of what she had to say, as the tape was degraded. Every fifth word dropped into a slur, then every third. Finally, the machine struggled to play the tape at all—the machine clicked off before Dodie had concluded her remarks and could turn the occasion over to the other panelists. This artifact, only partially audible, is exemplary for the partial traces New Narrative has left behind, the kind of incompleteness that has prompted me and other scholars of New Narrative to innovate around deficiencies in its particular record.

And then, in 2019, everything changed. Not too long after the great burst of attention and legitimization that the conference and its surrounding publications gained for New Narrative, Kevin suddenly died. My role as a self-appointed literary historian shifted to invited eulogist. In front of a packed auditorium bursting beyond capacity with friends and heroes and shadows of literary legends of decades past, I made an attempt to say goodbye to my friend:

... Anyway, back to being broke in Berkeley. Kevin offered me a gig: I was to complete a rough sort of his and Dodie's personal archives, as they were soon selling them to a big university. As court-mandated

community service, another former graduate student from UC Davis was sorting through their personal correspondence, and I got to go through everything else—Kevin’s college writings, Dodie’s valentines, unpublished manuscripts, notes for the Jack Spicer book, bank statements, sexy stuff, scandalous stuff. I could come by as much as I wanted or needed.

... It didn’t occur to me that Kevin might have recognized something about the condition of my finances and taken pity on me. He probably knew that he could do a little good by the paid work he was offering me. Of course, I saw that as my big chance: unfettered access to everything I was coming to value in life: friendly yet discriminating taste, sex, a wide range of friends, and a deep connection to history. Kevin was so wild and trusting—he gave me a set of keys to his and Dodie’s apartment, to their storage unit, to Kota’s studio where all the boxes were temporarily being kept. At the end of it all, he scolded me for refusing payment: *What kind of Marxist did they raise you to be out there in grad school?* Not a very good one, I’ll admit.

What do I want to remember with you all today? Kevin’s incredible generosity and his care for and interest in younger writers and creative weirdos of all stripes. I want to remember his humor and his lightness. So much felt possible when Kevin was around or in my mind. I want to acknowledge how important Kevin was as a queer elder, as someone who allowed us younger or less established individuals see ourselves in relation to those who came before. I can imagine Kevin conjuring up rare magazines and morsels of gossip. *You know, so-and-so would have loved you. You know, you should really read this book, this poet—and here’s my copy.* More gifts from Kevin Killian.

To recall New Narrative and participate in its history is to join in its collective dreaming. Bruce suggested as much to me in an interview published as part of *Life Blasted Open*. My research in the archives had occasionally brought me into contact with stories and fragments of stories that seemed dubious, toxic, contradictory. Interviews had been edited, massaged, reshaped. Distortions abounded, and I had played a part in their ongoing proliferation. When I asked him about the significance of the

1970s for New Narrative, he pointed to utopia: “The reason this whole period is so important is for the *sense* of utopia. Every so often conditions conspire such that people, rightly or wrongly, and so far it’s only turned out wrongly because it’s always reversed by the powers that be — people get the idea of living a fully human life, as if for the first time. To say yes, in such exaltation, we *will* do all this. That’s the reason — I think, that’s the reason to remember at all.” If I look back through my digital archives, I would be able to say exactly how I manipulated this quote to suit my own ends—but also, I hope, the needs of others: Bruce’s, New Narrative’s, and the people, like me, who have come to need New Narrative to make some better sense of their place in history and society.

Since at least the publication of Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*, postwar poetry in the United States has been heavily influenced by queer writers. However, the various traditions and lineages that comprise twentieth-century queer writing traditions have not always been appreciated in their moment or in the decades following due to, on the one hand, censorship and institutionalized homophobia, and, on the other, code-switching and self-obfuscation. Debates about the role of poetic speech and speech’s relationship to identity articulated in the late 1970’s further devalued the kinds of political poetics of marginalized groups, including queer writers, as well as women and writers of color. Though queer writers were active in the activism in the challenges that eventually brought gay and lesbian studies—and later



queer theory and queer studies—to university campuses, queer theory’s primary interest in novels has meant that queer poetics has yet to be appropriately reconsidered.

Focused on the San Francisco Bay Area, this dissertation draws from a number of archival holdings to reconstruct a history of queer poetics stretching from the emergence of a self-consciously American modernism in the 1950’s to the second decade of the twenty-first century, in the midst of a resurgence of anti-capitalist long-ing decades after the worst of the AIDS epidemic in North America. The dissertation begins with two chapters of literary criticism: the first dedicated to the life and works of editor Donald Allen, the second to the prolific multi-hyphenate, Kevin Killian. Complementing these more traditional chapters of literary criticism are two poetry manuscripts: *Minor Work* and *Don’t Leave Me This Way*. These manuscripts extend the concerns of the literary criticism regarding location, lyric speech, and historical feeling, in addition to drawing on archival research. Taken together, these chapters suggest some of the deficiencies in contemporary queer studies and literary history, which have yet to fully account for the lives and works of marginalized poets, even those who should be seen as essential to their composition.

Much like the broader projects of my literary scholarship and my poetry, there’s more to be done, but I can only hint at it here. In 2019, I was asked to contribute to two special issues dedicated to the growing field of New Narrative studies, but I was too sad. I was in the midst of my grief for Kevin, visiting Bob at Kaiser,

where he was recovering from a terrible, mysterious illness. New Narrative was so fragile. Not quite a dissertation, but here's what I managed:

We barely know what New Narrative is, and whether it has expired or endured. In 2018, I visited Bob at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland, promenading with him around his floor, literally responsible for his well-being, all his charm supported by my right forearm. We walked back to his room and caught the second half of Josef von Sternberg's *The Devil Is a Woman*, starring an incandescent Marlene Dietrich. She breaks men's hearts deliciously, her going for broke feeds something wicked in me, and Bob and I gush over the lux costumes until his nurse returns. Everyone who walks in comments on Bob's view of the hills, which is terrific as long as you don't look down. That's where they've brought down one building to make room for the next. Does that kind of progress feel natural?

New Narrative may be the thread I pull and pull and drag to me story after story of what literature has been – not only aesthetic principles, but actually people living actual lives. In his essay for *From Our Hearts to Yours* (2017), Brian Teare writes that New Narrative has not been incorporated into curricula and histories of literature or sexual politics due to the unavailability of New Narrative texts. The books have been out of print, so how could they have been studied? Yes, and: a compounding homophobia that has seriously damaged queer writing in various ways over decades. AIDS touches this story at all points – some writers died, others withdrew, publishers folded, archives were lost, people simply vanished. We barely know what happened, the story of gay writing in the United States. New Narrative is not exceptional in all of this, it is merely my entry point, a collection of publications and names and correspondences I can follow to the corners of the earth...

2019 will always be the year of losing Kevin Killian. I met him in his hospital room in San Francisco, making small talk and gossip with him and Anne McGuire and Rebeca Bollinger. I was glad that Kevin wanted to still get down to gossiping about our mutual friends, break-ups and back alleys. He was not the first New Narrative writer who felt comfortable taking a piss in front of me. And what did he tell me after I kissed him on the forehead? I was so handsome and talented. I had it

all he said, and when the time came to walk away I did just that, appreciating the elegant clicking of my hard soles all the way down the hallway. I left him to sleep there, with my promise to get back to work.

## A Private View: Donald Allen and *The (Not So) New (Queer) American Poetry*

### 1. Remembering Donald Allen

When Donald Allen's name is listed in a book's index, it is most likely in relation to his editing the landmark anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Allen's anthology was the definitive poetry anthology of the counterculture, a reputation supported by its adoption in university classrooms during the post-secondary education boom of 1960s. The hegemony of *The New American Poetry* was reaffirmed in the 1990s, during the second conflagration of the so-called "anthology wars," when a new generation of anthologists looked to Allen's anthology as a model of scope, authority, and impact. In 2013, a collection of essays was published to celebrate the fifty-year anniversary of the anthology. In his introduction to the volume, John Woznicki writes, "Scholars to this day continue to find *The New American Poetry* and its poets still viable—the work still influential, the echoes still reverberating. I do believe that, in another fifty years, another collection of essays will mark the yet-to-be-conveyed and developed influences that this anthology will have on us as a centennial volume that will celebrate this anthology's contribution to poetry everywhere" (10). The grandiosity of such claims would have been a surprise to Allen. In contrast to magnitude of the anthology's influence, Allen's stated aspirations for the anthology were quite modest. Allen estimated that the anthology might sell 5,000 copies in its first year. It would actually go on to sell 28,000 in that

amount of time, ultimately putting over 110,000 copies into circulation within its first ten years in print.

For decades *The New American Poetry* has been routinely invoked as the alternative to the official “academic verse” of the New Criticism and its inheritors, and so Allen’s collection of “a third generation” of American avant-garde poets has served an iconic function for literary critics basically since its publication by Grove Press in 1960. Perhaps Allen’s most famous contribution to American letters is his oft-quoted introduction to the anthology, which accounts for the relative obscurity of the collected poets while nevertheless bolstering the opposition between so-called “academic verse” and the New American poets’ avant-gardism:

These new younger poets have written a large body of work, but most of what has been published so far has appeared only in a few little magazines, as broadsheets, pamphlets, and limited editions, or circulated in manuscript; a larger amount of it has reached its growing audience through poetry readings. As it has emerged in Berkeley and San Francisco, Boston, Black Mountain, and New York City, it has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse. Following the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, it has built on their achievements and gone on to evolve new conceptions of the poem. These poets have already created their own tradition, their own press, and their public. They are our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry. (xi)

The anthology divides its contributors into five sections, loosely based on four geographic centers (Black Mountain, San Francisco, the bi-coastal Beats, and New York) with a fifth section gathering up the loose ends—poets from the Northwest, Boston, New Jersey, and elsewhere. But, as many reviewers noted, one of the major innovations of the anthology was its inclusion of “Statements on Poetics.” In letters, essays, poems, and journal entries, the poets opened their writing practices to a new public, often the largest any of them had found to date—as often distinguishing themselves from one another as reinforcing affiliations and making the social associations of this diverse assembly explicit. This was a clique (or a series of cliques), even when it wasn’t always clear what held this poetic fraternity together.

For such an important figure of postwar American poetics, Allen remains remarkably obscure as a historical subject. This is all the more surprising given Allen’s many accomplishments as an editor and a publisher. Donald Allen was almost fifty years old when he wrote the preface to *The New American Poetry*. He had spent most of the 1950s in the exciting world of New York City publishing, after serving in the United States Navy during World War II. Allen had moved to New York following his latest (and last) attempt to get his PhD, this time at the University of California. It was at Berkeley in the late 1940s that Allen first met the trio of poets whom he would champion for the rest of his life—Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, and Jack Spicer. Throughout his life, Allen returned to Berkeley, San Francisco, and the greater Bay

Area, and he would publish some of its most iconic writers, first as the West Coast representative for Grove, and later through his two smaller presses—the Four Seasons Foundation and Grey Fox.

In addition to *The New American Poetry* and its related volumes *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, *New American Story*, and *The Postmoderns*, Allen might be remembered for his other work for Grove Press, co-founding *Evergreen Review* and editing the first eight volumes of the quarterly with Barney Rosset. Allen was a critical supporter of Charles Olson and Frank O’Hara, including editing the latter’s *Collected Poems* (earning O’Hara a posthumous National Book Award in 1974). In addition to publishing O’Hara, Allen was also crucial to the early careers of many gay writers—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, John Rechy, Michael Rumaker, Aaron Shurin, Robert Glück, and Samuel Steward, among others. And yet, despite such a sterling *curriculum vitae*, Allen has not received much attention from critics or literary historians. If anything, critics who have attended to his various literary endeavors have often minimized Allen’s decisive role as an editor.

Such diminution has been possible because Allen was remarkably circumspect about sharing any of his opinions with the public. *The Collected Writings of Donald Allen* would consist of only a handful of pages—the terse prefaces, introductions, and afterwords of a fraction of the books he edited. Typical of Allen’s reluctance is Ralph Maud’s *Poet to Publisher*, which reconstructs the correspondence of Charles Olson and Donald Allen. Even though the collection is built around Maud’s obsessive

interest in Olson, the volume might have offered a rare glimpse of Donald Allen's side of literary history. This possibility was foreshortened, however, at Allen's request; Maud largely substitutes reproductions of the letters with simple summaries of their contents. Furthermore, there is also some evidence that the recollections of Allen's preface to *Poet to Publisher* was originally drafted by Kevin Killian. This was a reticence Allen maintained throughout his life.

Except for a small few, which are integral to my study here, interviews were also regularly circumscribed. For example, when Kevin Killian talked with Donald Allen for the Jack Spicer biography *Poet Be Like God*, he was not allowed to record the conversation; what remains of their conversation exists as four pages of typewritten notes among their seventeen folders of correspondence. Following Allen's death in 2004, *Jacket2* published a quartet of tributes to Donald Allen penned by Killian, Glück, Shurin, and Marjorie Perloff. Glück's "Tribute" expresses a certain ambivalence about talking about his late friend and publisher: "Writing about Don, I realize that few people know what he was like, and I would not want to torque my description. At the same time, I find I am reluctant to intrude on a privacy that was closely guarded" (298). As Glück suggests, there seems to be a deliberate effort on the part of Allen to become unknown by history, to disappear himself, especially his personal life, from the historical record.

Even so, Allen's incomplete vanishing act has not prevented critics and literary historians from invoking his name and legacy, even as his biography remains



mostly occluded by his purposeful silence. Two recent books of criticism—Loren Glass’s *Counterculture Colophon* and Juliana Spahr’s *DuBois’s Telegram*—include discussions of Allen’s work for Grove Press and its relationship to national and global literature. In pursuit of an answer to the claims made by *Counterculture Colophon* and *DuBois’s Telegram*, I center the biographical and historical framework of my account on Allen’s sexuality, which speaks to the social and collaborative dimension of many of Allen’s editorial projects and draws out their political consequence. As I will discuss in greater detail later, I find that a more complete picture of Allen’s life actually bolsters *and* undermines claims about the relationship of Donald Allen and *The New American Poetry* to the project of American imperial supremacy.

Recognizing the queerness of Allen’s anthology does not in itself refute claims of literary nationalism, and I don’t mean to. Instead, I suggest that *The New American Poetry* might be seen as participating in a complex and even contradictory matrix of aesthetics, sexuality, and nationalism that runs from *The New American Poetry* to its inheritors in the decades that follow.

Through biography, I mean to do more than merely invoke Donald Allen iconographically so that I might better analyze Allen and the queer New American poets’ experience of the fomenting tides of postwar modernism, American Cold War nationalism, and the emergent possibilities for sexual politics during this period. The various combinatory effects of these seemingly contradictory paradigms are essential to understanding the roots of an American queer literary tradition; postwar

modernism, nationalism, and sexual identity have all directly influenced and indirectly regulated the possibilities of queer literature and politics. It is their particular confluence, also, that suggests why the queer literary tradition—one of the most productive and influential strands of American literature—remains “unspoken” despite its impact and robust representation in later period-defining anthologies. At the center of my inquiry are two related questions: What does it mean that the root of postwar American poetry is the particularly queer literature of *The New American Poetry*? And what does it mean for literary studies that the queerness of *The New American Poetry*, so apparent to its reviewers in the 1960s, has gone relatively unexamined within contemporary scholarship?

One important exception to this critical penumbra is the criticism of Michael Davidson, in particular his essay “Compulsory Homosexuality.” Davidson’s analysis attempts to reconcile the assumed contradiction between the New American poets’ prevalent homosexuality, misogyny, and the authoritative command of the impeccably straight Olson over the tidal wave of homosexual talent represented by *The New American Poetry*. Davidson argues that the New American poets cultivated a defense against their “objectification” and “feminization” by lyric poetry through a protective form of poetic kinship: a male community of “compulsory homosociality.” Davidson explains,

By studying compulsory homosociality as a structure of subject production rather than a value system or form of sexual preference I am arguing that even within the most progressive communities—

whether homosexual or heterosexual—forms of misogyny and homophobia are often necessary to their continuation. By applying this analysis to Black Mountain and San Francisco literary communities, I do not mean to diminish the subversive and oppositional possibilities that these groups represented. In fact it is because these movements mounted such a significant challenge to traditional models of American social identity during the 1950s that we need to understand what ideological closures continue to speak through a verse so often characterized as open. (48)

Davidson's nuanced criticism resonates with queer scholarship that considers the corollary (if unintended) violence of the American gay rights agenda, including Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* and Chandan Reddy's *Freedom With Violence*, as well as other literary histories, such as James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement* and Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde*, which call out the maintenance of supremacist ideologies by the New American poetry tradition. Like the work of these other critics, Davidson's "Compulsory Homosexuality" successfully demonstrates an important skepticism about an assumed correspondence between progressive politics and avant-gardism.

Nevertheless, Davidson's argument relies on its narrow focus on two figures, Charles Olson and Jack Spicer, the latter of which had an especially masculinist view of homosexuality quite distinct from that of many of the other queer New American poets. Is it such a surprise that queer subjects, including homosexual men, participated in and benefited from supremacist ideologies of homophobia and misogyny? Robert Duncan had brought up such apparent contradictions as early as 1944, in his essay "The Homosexual in Society." I would like to suggest, without

presupposing any particular corollary politics for homosexuality, that *The New American Poetry* offers a unique vantage on the active, collective production of sexual identity and politics during the postwar decades. Borrowing the language of Christopher Nealon, I recognize *The New American Poetry* as a “foundling text,” produced in the uncertain period between the emergence of sexology in the late nineteenth century and the consolidation of a gay identity, as emblemized by the Stonewall riots of 1969. Within this framework of erotic and social experimentation, *The New American Poetry* may be appreciated for the diversity of ideas about sexuality it contains, and it is this unresolvable plurality I seek to emphasize. This plurality is not *necessarily* liberatory; for example, it may not be necessary to invent a theory that reconciles misogyny and homosexuality, as misogyny might simply be a constitutive element of a certain conception of homosexuality, as it was, apparently, for Jack Spicer. For there is not any one homosexuality, but variously constructed homosexualities—just as there is no single foregone sexual politics, but many appreciably different, apparently contradictory forms of sexual politics.

In the context of *Guys Like Us*, Michael Davidson’s twinned notions of “compulsory homosociality” and “heroic masculinity” define a process of muting the charge of homosexuality for Cold War poets during the 1950s, effectively sanitizing the figure of the poet for the emergent “boy gang” of the New American poets. This criticism is of limited use for queer literary historians who might be less surprised by homosexuality’s containment and more interested in those traces of homosexuality

that managed to escape such homophobic maneuvers. Nevertheless, these strategies do emphasize the great significance of the social dimension of American modernist poetics, beyond any simple notion of collegiality and acquaintance. The importance of poets' social lives has often been emphasized, including in Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies* and Anne Dewey and Libbie Rifkin's co-edited volume *Among Friends*. Dewey and Rifkin write of the frequent refrain of community within postwar poetry criticism: "The poetics of community and organization of literary history around communities have been a productive focus for mapping literary history since the birth of the modernist avant-garde. As a crucial source of mutual support and promotion, group manifestoes, alternate canons, little magazines, and anthologies have organized much post-1945 literary history" (10). Despite being a common feature of poetry criticism, the poetics of friendship has continually been overlooked, marginalized as a critical mode through its feminization and racialization (10-12).

Donald Allen's introduction to *The New American Poetry* certainly contributed to this marginalization of the communal aspects of the American avant-garde, and its self-reinforcing gender and racial blinders. (Though arguably even more crucial was the attention given to Allen's introduction by the anthology's reviewers and subsequent critics.) Allen's introduction stresses the importance of the New American poets on aesthetic grounds, stretching credulity by suggesting an undefined common artistry. However, as is clearly evident from Donald Allen's biography and other editorial work, the common feature of most of the New

American poets is their relationship to Allen himself. These personal relationships are only superficially mentioned in Allen's preface, and their significance is unevenly considered in the biographies and memoirs of the New American poets, despite the catalyzing effect of *The New American Poetry* for the literary careers of so many of its poets. And yet it was his personal relationships to the New American poets that Allen chose to emphasize when *The New American Poetry* was reprinted by the University of California Press in 1999.

*The New American Poetry* might gainfully be understood through a criticism that recognizes both its social and aesthetic aspirations. Further, scholars might also benefit from a consideration of the ways aesthetics have been wielded to contain the anthology's vibrant sociality, particularly its variegated and flagrant portraits of homosexuality. Accordingly, literary historians might consider the art history of Gavin Butt's *Between You and Me*, which examines the long decade between the publication of Alfred Kinsey's report on male sexual behavior in 1948 and the string of high-profile "exposés" of the homosexual subculture, including the famous 1964 spread in *Life*: "Homosexuality in America." This period of time roughly overlaps with the invention of *The New American Poetry*, from Allen's meeting Blaser, Duncan, and Spicer in the late 1940s during the Berkeley Renaissance to the enshrinement of *The New American Poetry* as the emblematic poetic document of the counterculture. Because it is a study of *queer* art history, it is not surprising that Butt's arguments are sensitive to the many (necessary and often tedious) nuances regarding

queer subjectivity and representation during the postwar period. The issue of nationalism in relationship to postwar modernism, for example, is central to Butt's theories of gossip and historiography.

Against the backdrop of a viciously homophobic McCarthyism, Butt theorizes an era of "sexual suspicion." Butt posits,

As a consequence of Kinsey's findings... male homosexuality was not only taken to be much more widespread than had previously been thought, but it was also deemed to be hard to identify by attention to outward forms of masculine appearance alone. This caused much trouble for cultural structures of sexual differentiation which had hitherto put great store by the male body's capacities for evidencing sexual identity. For instance, the lack of reliable methods of visible "detection" proved a hinderance to, and was the cause of much anxiety for, the leaders of the McCarthyite witch hunts, who, in the early years of the 1950s, were attempting to purge homosexuals from government employment. For if homosexuality weren't readily evident on the body, how were gay men to be identified and ejected from their supposed positions of power and influence? How could the (homophobic) job of the state be carried out? (9)

An irony emerges, Butt suggests, when the hermeneutics of suspicion of the McCarthy era are compared to the "positivist historical interpretation" of art historians who have located the meaning of the artist's work in the truth of his (homo)sexuality. Whether for the benefit of a homophobic state that sought to consolidate its postwar hegemony by naming queers as "security risks" or the belated appreciation of an art-loving audience acculturated to the critical silences produced by institutionalized homophobia, audiences have been prompted to read for the clues of homosexuality. In contrast, Butt theorizes "gossip's role *in* history, approaching it

as an important mode of communication for disseminating queer meanings in the 1950s and 1960s art world... [and] how gossip's narratives might operate *as* history, and how such unverified forms of knowledge might come to *queer* the very practice of historical accounting itself' (9).

Butt's theorization of gossip seems relevant to any study of *The New American Poetry* and Donald Allen, especially. Public and private discussions of works of art were *necessarily* different in the decades following the end of World War II; still, both public and private conversations contributed to and shaped the meaning of the artworks under discussion. The difference between Allen's 1960 preface to *The New American Poetry* and his 1998 afterword exemplifies this phenomenon. The preface focuses on aesthetics, representing the New American poets as the latest, most potent inheritors of the modernist tradition. The preface also aligns their poetry with "modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting," which, Allen stresses, is "today recognized throughout the world to be America's greatest achievements in contemporary culture" (xi). The afterword, however, focuses on Allen's personal relationships—how he met, befriended, and networked with poets; how he was persuaded to include or exclude certain poets, and by whom; what he was reading; and how he dispensed royalty payments. As Allen puts it, situating the origin of the anthology squarely in the realm of friendship, "One rainy afternoon it occurred to me that an anthology might be an effective way to introduce the new generation of poets I'd become increasingly aware of during the decade since the late forties when I first



met Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan at the University of California in Berkeley” (447). Allen doesn’t mention sexuality in his afterword, but he doesn’t have to: not only is the root of the anthology in halcyon days of the Berkeley Renaissance mentioned, but also the “very real problem of censorship” in light of the arrest and subsequent trial of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Shigeyoshi Murao, following City Light’s publication of *Howl and Other Poems*. Allen’s preface and afterword suggest two starkly different yet completely compatible stories about the significance of *The New American Poetry* and Donald Allen’s role as an editor.

## 2. The “Anthology Wars” Revisited, Again

The importance of Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* was immediately evident upon the anthology’s publication in 1960. Over the following decade *The New American Poetry* was celebrated and reviled, joining the tradition of banned books that have become classics. Bombastic prognostications aside, the enduring significance of *The New American Poetry* has been mostly genealogical, setting up its “third generation” of American modernists in a line with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. The anthology is often heralded for shaping a common understanding of American modernism as a matter of aesthetics—the “total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse.” As many have noted, it’s unclear what Allen assumed to be typical of academic verse. But perhaps anyone reading *The New American Poetry* might be able to gather a sense of what was being rejected by

way of reading the poetry assembled and then imagining its opposite. Allen's sly omission has proven quite felicitous, ultimately, allowing decades of readers to side with a brilliant band of outsiders against an opposing faction of shadowy academics.

Critics of the 1960s and later could and did take it upon themselves to name the unnamed antagonist, often pointing to a competing poetry anthology, *New Poets of England and America*, edited by poets Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson. Published by Meridian in 1957, the *New Poets* anthology is most often alluded to as the quintessential antithesis of *The New American Poetry*: academic (as opposed to avant-garde), conventional (as opposed to experimental), and mainstream (as opposed to marginal). Reviews from the 1960s often made distinctions between *The New American Poetry* and other poetry anthologies, though the battle between these two particular anthologies by later literary historians seems overstated. Nevertheless, the binary between academic verse and Allen's avant-garde was useful in the 1960s as well as throughout the 1990s, when several avant-garde poetry anthologies were published almost simultaneously. These questions about the future of American poetics in the tradition of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams defined the so-called "anthology wars" of both eras.

When speaking of the anthology wars, it can be difficult to assign primacy to those surrounding *The New American Poetry* in the 1960s versus the latter-day anthology wars of the 1990s. These moments are linked in their anxieties about the state of American poetics, and both moments focus on *The New American Poetry* as

an important counterpoint, whether to academic verse (in the 1960s) or a new generation of anthologies (in the 1990s) that might re-imagine the tradition of a new American poetry for the postmodern age. That is, the latter-day anthology wars refers to the contentious effort to produce an anthology similar to *The New American Poetry* in authority and scope, while also correcting, depending on the anthologist's vision of postwar sense of literary history, Allen's glaring omissions from the modernist canon and/or include more women and poets of color and/or canonize those exemplary poets whose work followed in the tradition of the New American poetry. Some of the anthologies produced in this vein include Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry Since 1950* (Marsilio, 1993), Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* (Norton, 1994), Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century* (Sun & Moon, 1994), and Dennis Barone and Peter Ganick's *The Art of Practice* (Potes & Poets, 1994).

At the center of the anthology wars of the 1990s was the issue of plurality, including the adjacent keywords identity and identity politics, multiculturalism, and postmodernism. The definitional flexibility of these words and their ability to contain radical social possibilities within a rubric of neoliberalism elide what is obvious about such a relatively massive output of anthologies: another historical crisis of American poetics. Wielding the publishing power of a large commercial press like Norton's, university presses like the University of California Press, and even several prestigious small independent presses like Sun & Moon, these anthologies attempt to actually shore up a historical narrative about American poetics. The irony is that without

exception these anthologies use *The New American Poetry* as a starting point and culminate with exemplary writers associated with Language poetry, which had been ascending within avant-garde writing circles since at least the late 1970s. The question for anthologists *and* critics seems to have been not who was worthy of the mantle of the New American poetry but how best to exhibit the place of the Language poets in the lineage of avant-garde poetry, which had been almost perfectly captured by Allen's anthology. In other words, the contradiction of the anthology wars was that as numerous and various as these anthologies were, anthologists and critics began and ended the history of American poetics at the same places, claiming Language poetry *as the margin*, again and again.

The pursuit of an ideal anthology for a new age of postmodern poetics was an issue not only for anthologists, but for literary historians as well. Thus, the anthology wars of the 1990s was defined both by this sheer deluge of poetry anthologies, each of which claimed to be authoritative in its own way, and literary scholarship specifically dedicated to poetry anthologies. The main studies of this period are Jed Rasula's *American Poetry Wax Museum*, which first named the anthology wars of the 1960s as such, and Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic*. With "Whose New American Poetry?" Marjorie Perloff also entered the zone of combat with her attempt to define the terms of engagement. Soon after, Golding provided *two* addenda, playfully suggesting his exhaustion by the matter in the titles of his essays "New, Newer, and Newest American Poetics" and "*The New American Poetry* Revisited,

Again.” Arguably, it was the anthology wars of the 1990s that completed the canonization of *The New American Poetry*, even when critics foregrounded the anthology’s many deficiencies.

Despite a decade of tireless debate, the influence of Allen’s anthology was undeniable, and a great irony of all the fierce debate surrounding the anthology of the 1990s was that with very few modifications the University of California Press reprinted *The New American Poetry* in 1999. (Though perhaps this was as much as matter of the strength of the anthology as it was a means of reinforcing the significance of anthologists’ and critics’ efforts.) Donald Allen lived through this second generation of the anthology wars, though it seems no one managed to secure his word on the matter. Exemplary of Allen’s ability to evade the spotlight: when Small Press Traffic celebrated the republication of *The New American Poetry* with a pair of sponsored lecture nights, it was not Allen who took the podium, but instead Golding, Perloff, Maria Damon and Davidson. Similarly, the most influential accounts of *The New American Poetry* stress the conditions that determined the anthology’s success and the collaborative nature of the anthology’s inclusions and exclusions—rather than, say, Allen’s skill as a curator of good poetry, a prescient observer of the poetic styles that would soon become mainstream, or his ability to negotiate the contrary demands of poets.

Jed Rasula’s *The American Poetry Wax Museum* is very helpful for its reading of the conditions surrounding the anthology’s reception. Drawing on reviews,

interviews, and later essays, Rasula investigates the formation of the now-classic competition between *The New Poets of England and America* and *The New American Poetry* in order to demonstrate how these anthologies have been made to function as a binary, constituting the two poles of American modernism in poetry. What's interesting, and maybe funny, is that the winner of the contest of these anthology wars was neither the academic poets nor the emergent avant-gardists. Instead, Rasula suggests that the victor supreme was Robert Lowell, whose distinction between the "raw" and "cooked" provided a third way for American poetry. In Rasula's estimation, Lowell formulated a theory of poetic extremes and then managed a negation of both sides, justifying his particular form of average in the National Book Award-winning collection *Life Studies*.

Alan Golding's essay, "The New American Poetry Revisited *Again*" also de-emphasizes Allen's personal responsibility for *The New American Poetry*. Golding writes, "The collection is as much the product of multiple, interacting poetic communities and affiliations, of correspondence among contributors and editor, as it is the work of an individual editor himself. In this sense, *The New American Poetry* is very much a communal construction or shared enterprise" (181). Allen himself had suggested as much in the preface to the anthology, of course. Still, Golding molds his discussion of the shared enterprise of *The New American Poetry* around two major contributors: Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. Drawing on their correspondence from the late 1950s, Golding reconstructs a dynamic epistolary exchange

characterized by resistance, impassioned pleas, and heavy conflicts that altered the contours and contents of the anthology. Golding discusses how Duncan and Olson provided Allen with lists of possible contributors, and Olson secured the dismissal of the earlier generations of avant-garde modernist poets—the “aunties” and “grandpas” as Olson writes to Allen. Conveniently, this dismissal left Olson himself at the center of Allen’s argument for “a strong third generation” of American poets. When considered alongside Rasula’s re-positioning of Lowell, Olson taking center stage in Golding’s analysis becomes all the more striking—as both critics, in de-emphasizing Donald Allen’s labors, open up space for a master poet to emerge in all his paternal splendor. By limiting Donald Allen’s role in producing the anthology, scholars have contributed to undervaluing the queer character of *The New American Poetry*.

When speaking of *The New American Poetry*’s queerness, I mean to stress Allen’s talent for evading the trap of binaries—finding a third way, compromising, or managing an evasion. Just as Allen’s anthology evades committing itself to either a jingoistic Americana or revolutionary anti-imperialism, modernism primarily understood as a matter of aesthetics or modernism primarily understood as a matter of sociality, *The New American Poetry* slips between an “explicit” homosexual poetry and a poetry of omission. The queerness of *The New American Poetry* circulates around and through sexuality as an evolving field, a grouping of bodies, pleasures, identities, and social lives. In retrospect, it’s striking that two of the first gay poetry anthologies—Ian Young’s *Male Muse* (1973) and Winston Leyland’s *Angels of the*

*Lyre* (1975)— included so many of the most famous of the New American poets: Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, Jack Spicer, John Wieners, and Jonathan Williams. Of course, *The New American Poetry* included many more homosexuals than the first gay liberation anthologies managed to publish, accounting for thirteen of the forty-four poets collected. LeRoi Jones, Jack Kerouac, and Philip Lamantia add even more of a queer petina to this list. But, to be clear, *The New American Poetry* is not a poetry anthology of queer writers, as Charles Olson’s undeniable prominence makes clear. Nor could it be, given the circumstances of its publication. Despite the recent victory for Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, the legal (and attendant economic) considerations for distributing literature that might be deemed obscene were often prohibitive. Through Barney Rosset managed to effectively challenge obscenity laws by championing several “obscene” titles, including *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and *Naked Lunch*. Significantly, the first gay poetry anthologies that circulated publicly were published well after the conclusion of the trial of *Naked Lunch* and the “end of obscenity,” as well as the emergence of Gay Liberation.

That said, the queerness of *The New American Poetry* isn’t *not* about sex. In addition to Allen’s social and aesthetic principles, there were rumors about Allen’s sexual appetites also played a part in his consideration of the anthology’s content. Jonathan Williams, for example, wrote to Allen Ginsberg in July of 1957, “I met Don Allen in November and gave him Layton, McClure and Ark. As you may know I have



designed Broughton's forthcoming book for Grove. I suspect they'll pick up a certain few of the poets, but (and be careful whom you tell) it may depend on attractions other than verbal; viz., RD, Robin Blaser, the allure of M. McClure, etc. But—that's part fo the scene anyway." In his remembrance of Donald Allen, Kevin Killian put the matter to rest, somewhat, when he wrote, "I used to ask Don about the role of the editor but after a while I stopped asking, for he would make me gifts to illustrate his answers. We would tease him about sex. He had never put any of his authors on the casting couch, he said, denying indignantly the rumors that had gathered around him for years. Yes, he'd had sex with one of the 'New Americans,' one only, that's all, only one. (Jack Kerouac.) He had, of course, been fond of many others, among them John Wieners, LeRoi Jones, Philip Whalen." Between many of its contributors, the sexual character of *The New American Poetry* was notorious and explicit, even if it was more fantasy than flesh. While it seems impossible to know for certain, perhaps this yet another binary Donald Allen maneuvered around, potentially using his position as editor to flatter, intimidate, and flirt.

The queerness of *The New American Poetry* has not been sufficiently discussed, nor have the implications of claiming such a queer poetry anthology as the root of postwar American poetics. Instead, informed by understandings of *The New American Poetry* stemming from the anthology wars of the 1990s, critics have focused on the anthology's relationship to literary nationalism. For example, Michael Davidson writes of the *The New American Poetry*:

The volume's cover, with its schematic rendering of the American flag, reminds us that [*The New American Poetry*] was engaged in a project of national redefinition as much as a poetic one. It was, as Alan Golding has pointed out, 'the single most influential anthology of the post-World War II period,' not because it was used in college classrooms, but because it collected the voices of several anti-academic schools and movements—Beat, Black Mountain, New York school, San Francisco Renaissance—that had been fueling the youth revolution in the late 1950s. The flag on the cover was partly patriotic but mostly satiric because it marked a set of alternative political and social positions to American consensus that would not be found in the reigning college anthology of the period, Brooks's and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. (200-201)

Reading *The New American Poetry* today, it would seem that homosexuality is clearly one of the most salient “alternative political and social positions to American consensus” reflected in the pages of the anthology, even though contemporary scholarship has tended to stray from any substantial discussion of the anthology's queer or sexual content. More exemplary of the kind of interrogation of the anthology's politics has been James Edward Smethurst's, as when he writes that “despite a general sense of being in conflict with McCarthyism, virtually none of the poets... retained any significant organizational connection to the remaining institutions of the Communist left into the 1950s; they were, in fact, generally hostile or indifferent to the Soviet Union and to the remnants of the Communist movement in the United States” (55).

Drawing on Smethurst and Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War*, Juliana Spahr dispenses with the idea that avant-garde modernism was indeed anti-nationalist. Noting the history of the CIA's covert funding of American avant-garde

modernism—for example, touring Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*—Spahr suggests how the radical promise of modernism could be effectively contained by state sponsorship as part of an unofficial American Cold War strategy. As Saunders and Spahr make clear, this was true for the visual as well as the literary arts. One of the main examples Spahr considers is *Perspectives USA*, funded by CIA money through the Ford Foundation, and edited by James Laughlin, founder of New Directions Publishing. Not to be underestimated, this is the general context that frames the emergence of *The New American Poetry*, even if Spahr provides only the slightest evidence of Allen’s involvement or the implications of his involvement relative to his sexuality.

While itself seemingly distant from cultural Cold War operations, *The New American Poetry* carries the imprimatur of their legacy in its title. Of course, such an innocuous title may have originated anywhere, and Allen leaves no clues in the anthology. However, if it is an inspired title, its most likely source is the exhibit “The New American Painting,” which was organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This show was funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, another route for CIA funding. According to his biographer, Brad Gooch, O’Hara was critical to this show’s success, though there’s no reason to believe he was familiar with the CIA’s “long leash” policy. Gooch writes, “Because of the overbooked schedules of the museum curators, ‘The New American Painting’ show almost never transpired, or at least was about to be postponed, until O’Hara and

[Waldo] Rasmussen zealously stepped in” (313). About “their missionary sense of the project,” Gooch quotes Rasmussen at length:

For Frank and me it seemed the great opportunity to do something important about American painting, and timing seemed critical... Together we drafted a schedule of preparation for the show which made it seem a feasible proposition (which it only barely was—less than five months was an incredibly short amount of time in which to prepare so major an exhibition and its catalog). Porter [McCray] used our memo to push his case for the show and Frank volunteered to help Dorothy Miller with the selection and all the paperwork concerned. (313)

In *The Cultural Cold War*, Sonders provides her own lengthy quotation of Rasmussen, who refuted the CIA’s involvement with the Museum of Modern Art’s International Program (225). Ultimately, the truth of the cultural Cold War and the extent of involvement by individual actors is unknowable. As Sonders admits, “There is no prima facie evidence for any formal agreement between the CIA and the Museum of Modern Art,” before concluding, “The fact is, it simply wasn’t necessary” (222).

Juliana Spahr critiques “how inadequate *New American Poetry* is to the time” on the grounds that it fails to represent poetries “written for and about various specific racial and cultural political communities”—that is, outside and against a presumed (American) universalism (114). What Spahr (and by extension Smethurst) ignores is the particular political plight of homosexuals, who were persecuted by American capitalists and Soviet communists alike. The relationship between homosexuals and the capitalism/communism binary was complicated and fluid, and there’s evidence to

support that American homophile organizations were more sympathetic to their American capitalist oppressors than foreign Soviet communism. However, scholars should not so swiftly dismiss the politics of Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Donald Allen, and the other gay bohemians of this era who sought a third way, when both of the given options were clearly so deficient for homosexuals specifically.

Smethurst and Spahr's suggestion that the poets of *The New American Poetry* were in conflict with McCarthyism "in a general sense" underscores how few critics of *The New American Poetry* have addressed the apparent contradiction between the anthology's identification with Cold War America and its inclusion of such splendid un-American obscenities. The potency of these obscenities seems irrelevant to Smethurst and Spahr, though it not lost on Stephan Delbos, who writes that for "Duncan and gay poets like him, the homophobia of American life during the 1950s—especially in the government and the academy—was not an abstraction" ("The Cold War Community of Love and Scorn"). Delbos's response is sympathetic to the sexual politics of the era, and he too is interested in a reframing of postwar politics around the unspoken "community of love" that Allen alluded to in his letter to Duncan in 1959. Nevertheless, this community of love is rather sexless in Delbos's ears, as when he writes of the "lack of explicitly homosexual poetry in *The New American Poetry*, with a few exceptions, mainly from Ginsberg." A comment such as this only seems to make sense in a situation where homosexuality is presumed to be a stable, legible text, rather than the literature of codes necessitated by the Cold War,

when, as Delbos writes, “homosexuals often felt compelled to mask and subvert their own sexuality, even in one another’s company.” As is evident from reviews of *The New American Poetry* from the 1960s, the sexuality of *The New American Poetry* was quite explicit to contemporary readers.

If readings of *The New American Poetry* as apolitical ignores the cultural power of the rampant sexuality of the New American poets, readings that hope to politicize *The New American Poetry* by way of a explicit sexuality seem to underestimate the effects of state repression. I suggest, in addition to reading homosexual identity in the 1950s as potential third position outside the capitalist/communist binary, that critics of *The New American Poetry* instead consider the ways in which the anthology presents a record of the containment of politics, both sexual and nationalist. Generally, homosexuality is constantly made available to a public conditioned to appreciate its codes, but, simultaneously, the conditions of its legibility are constantly changing in relation to the social and legal situation of homosexuals. By suggesting *The New American Poetry* be read as a document of containment, I mean to avoid claiming the anthology as a liberatory statement of homosexuality. Instead, *The New American Poetry* is yet another example of how American nationalism regulated an emergent sexual politics.

Donald Allen’s original intentions for *The New American Poetry* may have actually been quite modest, but after the anthology proved a success he endeavored for the rest of his life to support the poets he had helped to make more famous. *The*

*New American Poetry* spawned three follow-up volumes: *New American Story* co-edited by Robert Creeley in 1965, *The Poetics of The New American Poetry* co-edited by Warren Tallman in 1973, and *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised* co-edited by George Butterick in 1982. None of these volumes were as impactful as their predecessor—how could they be?—but they all contributed to the evolving sense of an entire generation of poets, artists, myth-makers, and fellow travelers. In addition to the Grove publications, Donald Allen began publishing some of the New American poets through his new press, The Four Seasons Foundation and its handsome series of slim volumes, simply called Writing. A second press, Grey Fox, was more wide-ranging in its publishing projects, and it was through Grey Fox—and its imprint, Perineum Press—that Allen made his most significant contributions to a massive body of literature that was more self-consciously gay. As always, details about this period of Allen’s life are scant, especially when they are not focused through the lens of those New American poets who have published memoirs or been the subjects of biographies. Nevertheless, despite a critical silence about Donald Allen following the anthology wars of the 1960s, he continued to make a deep impact on the literary establishment. This time, though, he worked on his own terms, in the sunny hippie realms of California, where things got a whole lot gayer.

## Queer Exhaustion: Kevin Killian's Utopian Poetics

### 1. The Poetics of Exhaustion

For the late Kevin Killian, San Francisco is not merely a city in which one resides, but a paradise of sex and art—or at least it has been. With increasing melancholy, his final poetry collections draw inspiration from the ruination of his adopted home, as Killian reels between the flagrant inequities of contemporary San Francisco and an ideal San Francisco that exists, now, mostly as a memory. Racing between these two San Franciscos, Killian does seem fatigued—though the memory of San Francisco seems inexhaustible in what it continues to offer the poet. Killian moved to the city in 1980 to live with his sister and focus on his dissertation. Instead, he stayed in San Francisco until his death in 2019 never having finished his degree. Instead, he made his way from the Small Press Traffic workshops that birthed *New Narrative* to become an icon of gay and experimental writing, ultimately publishing novels, plays, collections of poetry and stories, several edited volumes, thousands of Amazon reviews, and co-authoring a biography of Jack Spicer. When he died, Killian was still at work on a number of book projects, many years in the making, so it may seem heretical to describe the poetics of this singularly indefatigable man in terms of exhaustion. However, the framework of exhaustion may provide new ways of appreciating Killian's literary accomplishment. First, exhaustion suggests the feeling in Killian's late poetry of constantly shuttling between the past and the present. This exhaustion suggests a kind of haunting by the repressed loss of an ideal bohemian San



Francisco and, in particular, a gay world before the AIDS epidemic. Exhaustion also suggests an ethics of authorship, often practiced by Killian, whereby the singular, authoritative voice of the speaker is emptied out to make room for those of others. Like a cave that makes an echo possible, Killian's poetry exhausts personal matter to give space to a common choir of signification. The effects are both haunting and galvanizing in their informed optimism about what might still be possible for sexual politics.

"The Gifts of San Francisco," published in his final poetry collection *Tony Greene Era*, illustrates the tension between a past San Francisco of innovation and delight and a San Francisco of today, which must be undone. The poem consists of a list of the city's comestible inventions: the popsicle, the Mai Tai, cioppino, Irish coffee, the fortune cookie, Crab Louis, Pisco Punch, chicken Tetrizzini, green goddess dressing, the Martini, Rice-A-Roni, Hang Town Fry, and the It's-it (41-42). The poem begins,

These

were the gifts of San Francisco, the popsicle  
invented by a boy not even 12 years old, in a heat wave;  
the Mai Tai, like a chapter from Drew Cushing's novel  
of boy brothels in the days of the Barbary Coast;  
cioppino, crab soup of the Genovese fishermen who  
swam, like Mark di Suvero, through the towers of the Golden  
Gate Bridge—white thick hot mass of potash in bowl (41)

Throughout the poem, the culinary treats Killian catalogs shoot out associative tendrils that pull in their surrounding historical context (such as a heat wave) or more

idiosyncratic circumstances (such as Drew Cushing’s novel *Boy Brothel*, which Killian read as part of a private writing group). Still, composing this catalog of delightful “gifts” prompts Killian to lament, “I am tired of my self and of hobbling these lists, / in infinite reconstruction...” (43). “The Gifts of San Francisco,” after providing a chronicle of these former culinary innovations, also registers the burden put upon the chronicler to recall their place in history and the fullness of their associative life. Killian’s historical fatigue leads him to suggest that both the chronicle and the chronicler must be overthrown, as the poet beseeches with an urgency that threatens grammar, “I am tired of my self and of hobbling these lists, / in infinite reconstruction throw ashore your appetites, / want all of them to unravel under my skin, like that Korean movie we saw, / *The Host*...” (43). Unlike the chain of outright destruction occasioned by the monster of Bong Joon-ho’s film *The Host* —“chaos ensues, family implodes, a hundred things dissolve their hope in acid” (43) —Killian promises, “my gifts come softer than those,” though what this downiness means remains unclear. The poem concludes, “Ruined city under the apoplectic heel of the eel... in the blink of time in which the match head catches, can you see its / halo” (43). Killian’s own soft “gift” for “reconstructing” pop allusions shines in the final lines of the poem, which bathes Killian’s burn-it-down sentiment in the gasoline of Joon-ho’s science fiction and Beyoncé’s hit song “Halo.” Killian may be “tired of my self and of hobbling these lists,” but the poem nevertheless rings with an

optimism about rebirth through catastrophe, when the need to move between the two San Franciscos has finally ended.

Poems like “The Gifts of San Francisco” showcase one of Killian’s favorite modes of composition, his “infinite reconstruction” of the works and words of others through collage. In an interview with Tony Leuzzi, Killian says, “Collage is a good word for my approach. I believe in combining three strands of material to every story or poem or play... The funny thing is I can often see how the poem will look in my head before I write it, see how it looks so I know how many lines it is, how many pages it is, and what’s going to be happening on the page visually. So part of my process is filling in that canvas that I have already set up. Maybe it’s like a weaving on the loom. I can see the pattern already” (6-7). Killian’s collage techniques take on a necromantic ability in his first collection, *Argento Series*, which uses the “films of Dario Argento as a prism through which to take apart [the] horror of living and dying in the AIDS era.” Lurid and fecund with ghastly details, Argento’s *giallo* films provide the putrid screen against which Killian casts the flickering images of his fallen comrades, who are summoned up as portraits and gestures from the crypts of dozens of sources. Like the associations that perfume “The Gifts of San Francisco,” Killian’s allusions in *Argento Series* range from the literary to the art historical to the intensely private to pop culture confections like ABBA and The Spice Girls. The mixture of “high” and “low” interests is a hallmark of New Narrative, which politicized such cultural improvisations and boundary-crossings. But this is also a

matter of camp, code-switching, and in-group discourse. Alan Gilbert writes that, somewhat surprisingly given the serious subject matter, “there’s an abundance of humor and delight in *Argento Series*. Much of this occurs in allusions, references, and jokes that Killian shares with the different communities with which his book is in dialogue” (38). Both raucous and gutting, citations and sentiments are assembled in Killian’s poetry to create a community of the living and the dead.

There is something queer and utopian about such communion that recognizes the traces of those who are no longer living and disturbs the sanctity of the here and now. Gilbert draws out the disturbance of the here and now by comparing Argento’s use of spectacular violence in his *gialli* to the torn patchwork of discourses that comprise Killian’s poetry: “As the camera’s subjective point of view in Argento’s films implicates the viewer and makes her or him participatory in the action, so, too, does Killian’s *Argento Series* make the reader a participant in history, and not simply an observer of it” (39). In accord with José Esteban Muñoz’s sense of “queer world-making,” Killian’s poetry draws readers into a participatory relationship with history: laughing at old jokes, scratching heads at anachronisms, mourning strangers, and yearning for another time and place. In his introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes, “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (1). Muñoz’s idealism is an apt framework for thinking about Killian’s poetry because both Muñoz and Killian champion strategies

for undermining complacency for the world as it has been realized by exciting a passion for another world, whether that is for utopia or for “the glittering world” of San Francisco before the AIDS crisis. Of the literature of queer world-making, Muñoz writes,

The cataloguing of public sex culture that [Douglas] Crimp performs in “Mourning and Militancy” can be read alongside [John] Giorno’s text [*You’ve Got to Burn to Shine*] as an act of queer world-making. More specifically, I see world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present. (37)

Including *Argento Series*, Killian’s poetry and prose often perform “queer utopian memory,” whetting our appetite for the “fabulous world” that was foreclosed by AIDS. Killian, for example, offers this glimpse of that other world in his interview with Tony Leuzzi: “I remember the days before AIDS as a non-stop paradise of the senses. Despite what was happening in the outside world, the 70s in San Francisco were a fantastic time to be alive, to be a young gay man. For one thing, and actually it was nearly everything for me then, one could have sex constantly. That’s how we said hello—without any kind of guilt or fear.”

Because Muñoz identifies that utopian longing must exceed the desire for “some nostalgic past that perhaps never was,” it is interesting to note that Muñoz chooses Giorno’s sexual reportage as an example of “casting” “a picture of utopia.” In order to undermine claims of nostalgia, Muñoz stresses that “Giorno’s narrative rings of idealization and writerly hyperbole, which is not to doubt the ‘truth’ of his account.

In the passage, Giorno functions as a disseminator of public sex culture. The idealization that his prose enacts is, within the scope of my analysis, an example of the way in which a rich remembrance of sexual utopia feeds a transformative queer politics” (36). Killian’s comments in his interview with Leuzzi also feature an “idealization and writerly hyperbole” akin to Giorno’s prose. In fact, Killian takes his duties as “disseminator of public sex culture” quite seriously, telling Leuzzi, “If you and I, for example, had met in the 70s, Tony, we would have had sex before I found out your name.”

Killian’s poetry casts off some of the nostalgia that makes a false romance of the past, thereby increasing the strain of utopian longing—not toward a past that has been known, but toward a paradise that can only be suggested. Take for example the ending of the poem “Today It’s Me!... Tomorrow You!,” which ends with a nested image of utopian sexual discovery:

it was an older man showed me  
the steps of the dance  
I can’t forget  
tall man whose shoes I  
stepped on when  
I was trying

to write  
before AIDS catastrophe  
made writing inequitable  
the mind, alone, a corsage  
of pink crinkles rather  
like the asshole of Tommy  
which when

I touched it with my thumb  
wet

shivered alive, alert  
in Port Jefferson  
above a harbor ringed with boats  
on the bed a web of his  
wet clothes  
that's me  
thinking (87)

Across these three stanzas spans a corridor of erotic connection that includes “an older man,” “Tommy,” and “me.” Enjambment and the suggestion of appositive phrasing multiply the possibilities for when and where discrete connections may have occurred, though it is the speaker, “thinking,” who is able to produce such an amorous tether to bind together these lovers, even across the disturbance of stanza breaks and the “AIDS catastrophe.” Harder to define, perhaps, than Giorno’s hyperbole, Killian’s poetry nevertheless offers its own kind of utopian realism. Given that Killian’s utopian realism does not elide catastrophe, it seems perhaps even more capable of instilling in its readers that yearning for another world. In his poetry, Killian’s refuses to make a smooth image of a fragmented world.

Beyond arousing a desire for “a then and there,” the content of queer politics may be as unknowable as queerness, which exists for Muñoz always on the horizon. Though Killian did not see himself as a particularly potent political actor, his later collections, especially *Tweaky Village* and *Tony Greene Era*, explicitly took up an anti-capitalist posture. Killian, in an interview with Matt Rohrer, said of *Tweaky Village*, “I suppose it is a book of defeat really. Just as while writing *Argento Series I* came to realize how little I had done to stop the march of AIDS, *Tweaky Village* is me wrestling with how little I did to combat neoliberalism, which manifests itself

visually every time I walk out my door and see the new, hyperwired global capital that is San Francisco today.” Killian and the rest of the New Narrative group are often understood in the context of political struggles around gender and sexuality, but, following *Argento Series*, Killian reserves his greatest political vitriol for the economic system that has transformed San Francisco into a lesser world fueled by neoliberalism, homonormativity, and indifference that he would rather see “under the apocalyptic heel of the eel.”

Through his approach, Killian confronts what Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism,” that “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (2). For Killian, he does not need to *imagine* a coherent alternative to capitalism, so much as *assemble and re-member* the versions of San Francisco he experienced when he moved to the city in the early 1980’s. Still, Fisher warns, “A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism” (16). Fisher cautions that there is a limited efficacy in decrying the effects of capitalism without attending to the ideology that maintains its suffering as a norm, as a regrettable but rational corollary of capitalism. Fisher calls upon the theories of Jacques Lacan to produce a strategic counter to capitalist realism: “For Lacan, the Real is what any ‘reality’ must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an



unpresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us” (18). Similarly, the poetry of Kevin Killian often glimpses “a traumatic void” “in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of reality.”

Usually, this void consists of the great loss engendered by the AIDS epidemic and the governmental inaction that allowed it to flourish. In *Argento Series*, the jarring, uncertain leaps between allusions, and between the matter of AIDS and the frame of Argento’s films, adds to a sense of fracturing and inconsistency with the sensible. In his writings on *Argento Series*, Colin Herd adapts the concept of syncope to describe how Killian disturbs reality through breaks with consciousness. Herd writes, “Weaving syncope through the films and through a network of memories, associations and the triggers of bricolage fragments from other writers, Killian establishes his own echo chamber in which flickering images of Argento’s films seem to move in and out of focus, creating a rhythm that mimics the experience of syncope and then ‘coming to.’ He allows us to become lost in Argento’s surreal horror landscape and then opens up the brutal reality of the AIDS crisis” (202). Precisely through “fractures and inconsistencies” with consciousness, *Argento Series* communicates a traumatic void that, paradoxically, cannot be represented. Cumulatively, Killian’s disorienting effects suggest the effort required to make sense

of such a profound loss and also the pressure that must be exerted upon the Real to make a “post-AIDS” reality bearable.

After *Argento Series*, Killian often returned to the unrepresentable loss of the AIDS epidemic, including in his final collection *Tony Greene Era*. Killian’s collection is dedicated to his friend, the painter Tony Greene, who was only thirty-five when he died of complications from AIDS. Killian never lays out exactly what he means by the “Tony Greene Era”—perhaps it is sum of all the days that have passed since Tony Greene’s death in 1990; perhaps it is meant to be more suggestive than chronological, drawing attention to Greene’s fall into obscurity following his death and his subsequent recovery in recent years thanks to dedicated artist friends; perhaps it is the utopian moment that Killian celebrates in the title essay of *Tony Greene Era*, when “our great artists had an attitude towards the market that was, to one degree or another, a big fuck you. They would make their artwork out of rags and biscuits if they liked, they would make things so ugly and so temporary they would fall apart when you brought them into the light of day” (92). Each of these possibilities suggests a variety of haunting—by the dead, by history, by “queer utopian memory”—and there’s no need to choose between them, remembering the compounding losses of the Tony Greene Era. Such a plurality of hauntings also seeps into the practices of many of the visual artists who were contemporaries of Greene and whom Killian cherishes. First, there is Killian’s opening description of Greene’s art:

The work of the late, Los Angeles-based artist Tony Greene borrows, often as not, from preceding paint strategies, with a premium on the glowing, the luminous, the grand. Many times we recognize the face or visage of some dreamy man with the Mel Odom looks popular in the Stonewall era of the 1970s. But a glaze lies between us and the man of desire: a glaze profound and dark, which simultaneously lays waste to this beauty, occludes his image. (86)

Killian later compares Greene's work with that of Wayne Smith in order to praise the craft of both artists for their invocations of history: "Smith and Greene share a similarly awkward relationship to the past, with details of an ornamental, pictured memory—sexualized, idealized—floating up in their artworks like Freudian slips—the repressed returning with a vengeance" (88). Of course, much of the same could be said about Killian's poetics, which, like Greene's assemblages (or Smith's paintings), court an "awkward relationship to the past," one shorn of the trappings of nostalgia and yet still alluring with utopian fullness. And similar to Greene's glaze, which both attracts the viewer to beautiful depths that nevertheless remain hidden, Killian's collage techniques suggest the void of trauma that moves in the interstices of his fragmented lyrics.

The final poem in the collection, "Exhausted Autumn," offers another example of Killian's use of collage techniques that draw in a range of voices and echoes to produce a queer utopian community of the living and the dead. However, unlike *Argento Series*, which lists scores of sources, Killian includes no acknowledgments to provide proof (or clues?) of his methods, though he does mention that the title of the poem was inspired by the "handsome catalogue [that] accompanied a traveling retrospective of [Greene's] work in the months following his death—a show called

*Exhausted Autumn...*” (86). “Exhausted Autumn” is also the name of the artwork that serves as the frontispiece for the catalogue, and ultimately lends its name to the final section of *Tony Greene Era*. From artwork to traveling show to frontispiece to catalogue to poem to section title, the name of Greene’s work continues to move, haunt, and provide an occasion for remembering Greene and the world of which he was part. Some of the material that’s repurposed throughout “Exhausted Autumn,” producing, once more, the effect of an echo chamber, includes material adapted from the “catalogue” and the painting *Exhausted Autumn*: the colors green and gold refer to the cover of the catalogue (as well as Tony Greene’s last name), and “the mute of a deer shy” occupies the left third of Greene’s artwork. “Exhausted Autumn,” the poem, leaps through history, beginning with the speaker’s fixation on a painting:

While my loans backed up, like sewage, steady my gaze held at a deep  
fixed surface of paint. I watched as invisible strokes poked  
from out of the frame, like tendrils, like the fly—

the green fly of your green jeans,

There was endless and magnificent antiquing in the Valley, Tony,  
—and their tricks are seductive; beware their blue eyes and  
white t-shirts,

cum rags.

They are pollen on the wind of a sky (94)

These first stanzas of “Exhausted Autumn” immediately thematize the historical slipperiness active in Killian’s early poetry, as the “surface of paint” (presumably one made by Greene) initiates a chain of associations: “the green fly of your green jeans,”

antiquing in the Valley, the cum rags of the “tricks” with “their blue eyes.” The tense of these associations also shifts, from past (“my gaze held” and “There was endless and magnificent antiquing”) to the present (“their tricks are seductive”), leading to a direct address (“beware their blue eyes and white t-shirts”). Much like the Real that reality tries to suppress, this variegated sense of historical proximity percolates beneath “a deep / fixed surface of paint,” though the serene surface is ultimately undermined by “invisible strokes [poking] / from out of the frame.”

In *The Gentrification of the Mind*, Sarah Schulman suggests that “the unexplored consequence of AIDS” “and the literal gentrification of cities” “created a diminished consciousness about how political and artistic change get made” (14). Killian, a friend and fellow traveler of Schulman’s, pursues a similar line through his enmeshment of the trauma stemming from AIDS and a critique of capitalism’s effects on memory and meaning. To do so, “Autumn Exhaustion” thematizes exhaustion so that it might reflect the historical condition of being caught up in the Tony Greene Era, as well as the distinct yet related feeling of neoliberalism run rampant. Killian’s poetry does not romanticize exhaustion as a necessary or natural condition preceding sleep. Instead, exhaustion comes on like a manufactured tragedy. Falling further into the web of associations initiated by Greene’s artwork, Killian returns to the language of horror by alluding to *Rod Serling’s Night Gallery*, before finding Tony Greene, possibly asleep on a ladder:

September. October, AIDS came and stalked the land. I had

just about decided fuck school, and then, well,

On the ladder, Tony, halfway up the steps, in jeans,  
are you sleeping?

Today a quaint, pale, alluring reply  
the color of baby aspirin.

In deepest green dusk you marshal your strength,  
September,

Gold lines the backing, as bit by bit you  
lose strength again,

October,  
while whole parts of the body achieve reification,  
your lips, Tony, your hands (95)

The image of Greene, “halfway up the steps,” is possibly sweet or devastating, given whether the artist is actually sleeping or whether he has died, and the poem mixes up Killian’s decision to leave graduate school for another life in San Francisco with the revelation of Tony Greene. As Killian imagines him, Greene is somewhere between sleep and exhaustion, “marshal[ing] [his] strength,” as Killian suggests, among the green and gold of *Exhausted Autumn*. Killian’s repetition of September and October infuses Greene’s surge and slump of vital energies with a cyclicity that might inspire or fatigue, like the steadiness of the seasons. However, Killian concedes that even the seasons do change, and “Exhausted Autumn” will become winter: “on the wave before you / a courreges of white snow, so thin it could be / white candy / the skin on Kristeva’s cocoa blanc.”

As the seasons turn, so too are the names of those friends Greene sought to secure through his art. Killian addresses Greene,

and you, on the bottom, holding up your mates, “Wes,”

“Matt” “Ed,” and “Joe.”

Autumn exhausted, the mute of a deer shy.

Names dissolve into rhymes, “Yes,” That,”  
“Dead,” “Oh.” (95)

That these echoes fail to reflect Greene’s fallen “mates” might seem unbearable, prompting the need to face the future dressed in the sleek fashions of André Courreges, “thin” as “the skin” of an exquisite dessert, an exquisite artistry that also suggests, through its own rhyme, courage. Enclosed in such an armor, Killian leaves Greene behind, struggling with his sense of history and the forces that make it harder to remember his lost friend:

What I could see coming was that  
I’d be here reading for you still,  
today, late at night in San Francisco...

The big space that held your works now privatized, a bank of condos,  
On the back of your trunks, sagging across your butt like a scaffold,  
beautiful name that once spelled the future (95-96)

The final lines of “Autumn Exhaustion” reinforce Schulman’s insights from *The Gentrification of the Mind*: propelled by real estate speculation, the transformation of the cityscape—of Schulman’s New York City or Killian’s San Francisco—greatly obscured the historical matter of the AIDS epidemic. Killian writes of the “big space” that’s now “a bank of condos”:

For me the most significant project Tony Greene undertook was his decoration, with Richard Hawkins, of the nonprofit artist-run space

LACE in Los Angeles. Given free rein to paint the building as they liked, the artists played it for all its worth, creating a two-story mural called “Chains of Bitter Illusion.” The building now belongs in private hands; the melancholy yet triumphant remnants of this project are few, faded, scarred by time and weather, and yet they are unspeakably beautiful and precious. (92)

In the lines “as bit by bit you / lose strength again, / October / while whole parts of the body achieve reification, / your lips, Tony, your hands” (95), “Autumn Exhaustion” predicts this act of privatization, so that the transformation of LACE into private property also suggests the privatization of memory. As an emblem of utopian memory whose “beautiful name... once spelled the future,” Tony Greene is limited in his ability to disturb the “fixed surface” of reality by the real estate speculation and consequent gentrification propelled by late capitalism.

Related yet distinct from the “infinite reconstruction” of lists and fragments that so exhausts Killian is the exhaustion of late capitalism. Jonathan Crary’s *24/7* suggests the pervasiveness of contemporary exhaustion by detailing the increasing impingement on sleep by an economy designed, in response to the crises of late stage capitalism, to function continuously: “In its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in production time, circulation, and consumption, sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe” (10). This universe demands that all terrain, material and immaterial alike, be made available to valuation, speculation, purchase, and redistribution for the benefit of capitalism’s normal functioning, which ever-increasingly deposits more resources into



fewer hands and has de-naturalized the givenness of sleep in contemporary life. Economic crisis emboldens the advance of a 24/7 world, but it is the rationality of neoliberalism that checks and restrains responses to a dissolving boundary between waking and sleeping life. To paraphrase Wendy Brown's argument from *Undoing the Demos*, while neoliberalism has often signified widespread deregulation and the general undoing of the social safety net, neoliberalism also entails those reality-generating principles that make such destruction appear, simply, inevitable and commonsense. Feelings of exhaustion may be attached to both operations of neoliberalism, its material consequences and its realism. It's exhausting to have one's life be made so precarious; it is also exhausting to be so hopeless.

However, while broadcasting animus for neoliberalism and its deleterious effects, Killian chooses, instead of merely lamenting the suffering that follows the troubling growth of contemporary capitalism, to *embrace* a form of exhaustion. Later poems like "The Gifts of San Francisco" and "Autumn Exhaustion," and the earlier collection *Argento Series*, offer a glimpse of Killian's prolific use of quotation and appropriation to sound the voices and to call the names of others. Like Greene, "holding up [his] mates," Killian innovates a poetics of exhaustion that eschews personal matter in favor of a collage of citations of his fallen friends. In "Autumn Exhaustion," he writes, "I spoke their names names across a sea of hey, fuck you, / desperate as a dove, / and in each frame rolled death, like dice..." (94). Killian's repetition of "their names across a sea of hey, fuck you" might weary the speaker, but

there remains a defiance inherent in Killian's poetry, one that must be read as utopian. Muñoz writes, "We must vacate the here and now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion. We need to step out of the rigid conceptualization that is a straight present" (185). Ditto the "rigid conceptualization" that is neoliberalism and its 24/7 universe, which "defeats the possibility of experience" by "steadily undermin[ing] distinctions between day and night, between light and dark and between action and repose" (17). Killian's poetry "vacate[s] the here and now" by exhausting (emptying out) the personal matter of his poetry. Where one might expect Killian to install his own opinions and sentiments, there can often instead be found the opinions and sentiments of others. Killian's use of collage in *Argento Series* offers a prime example of the poetics of exhaustion, given how Killian builds his poems through appropriation, pastiche, allusions, associations, and description of others. This is not to say that the poetry is not intimate or idiosyncratic; Killian's poetry remains resolutely his "own," often using a direct address that is no less effecting for its otherworldliness. The emphasis, however, shifts from Killian calling out his own name and extolling his private suffering across that treacherous "sea of hey, fuck you" to calling out those countless names of others and the collective trauma that Killian refuses to leave behind. Stressing the "tear in the fabric," Killian's poetics provide glimpses of what must be repressed in order for the "straight present" to persist, with all the violence and suffering capitalism requires. Certainly strange and difficult, the result is a

utopian poetry orienting us to another world—a UFO waiting for a million names to board, helmed by the one and only Kevin Killian, that “beautiful name that once spelled the future.”

## 2. Queer Exhaustion

“It was a time of fragments as well as absence,” Killian writes in “Tony Greene Era” of the AIDS epidemic, “I began dreaming of amputation, of waking up to find that a part of my body had been cut away. Later I realized it was me trying to put myself into the mindset of those who were fighting AIDS—deprived, as we saw it, of a future... Loss inside of loss” (91). Killian’s invocation of “Loss inside of loss” suggests how San Francisco, once a beacon of liberation, risks losing both its past and its future—budding friendships and careers, the stories of others’ previous attempts to make a utopia of this special city of bohemians and sexual renegades. Killian asserts the special role of art to register this unfolding double-loss: “In this time, when both form and content seemed to have broken down, we placed faith in color. The black and pink and white of the ‘Silence = Death’ logo” (91). Published thirty years after Gran Fury inverted a pink triangle in the window display of the New Museum in New York City, *Tony Green Era* furthers the art collective’s mission to inspire justice in the face of an overwhelming, genocidal indifference by putting back into circulation the myths, names, and possibilities of a dream of San Francisco. And yet Killian’s political messaging might seem to lack the urgency or clarity of Gran Fury, or of the

artists more commonly associated with activist art practices calling for a swift and robust response to the epidemic. Killian writes in the biographical sketch printed on the back of *Argento Series*, that in 1991, “Kevin frozen, unable to think of a way to write about AIDS crisis.” In his interview with Tony Leuzzi, Killian explains,

Basically it was a feeling of frustration of living through the AIDS epidemic, losing so many friends, and not being able to do anything about it in writing. Every time I tried to write something it sounded ridiculous—hokey, sentimental, or as if I were posturing. In any case, it seemed the enormity of the crisis dwarfed any individual response. And yet I always felt bad about it. Sarah Schulman has said that in the future History will judge all of us by what we did during that time. I was like, “uh-oh!” because I had not done enough. (2)

Killian’s poetics of exhaustion provide a mode of engagement that might match “the enormity of the crisis”; through collage and appropriation, Killian produces poems that echo his fallen friends and heroes, Tony Greene among them, effecting a poetics of haunting that can be carried, precariously, into the future.

Killian’s practice of collage and appropriation, however, are not only inspired by his experience with the trauma of the AIDS epidemic. Certainly, Killian’s poetics must also be considered in light of New Narrative’s relationship to Language Poetry, and their theory-infused skepticism about poetic expression. Characteristically, New Narrative writers, like Killian, produced a literature that, in the words of Robert Glück, sought “a third position that would encompass the whole argument” (14). Such a “third position” would simultaneously recognize that language cannot perfectly express the inner truth of an individual nor can language signify the world and its phenomena without the risk of failure, *and* that the consequences of failures

and contingencies of language work unevenly, producing asymmetrical rates of violence and precarity for different communities—New Narrative being chiefly a marginalized community of gay men that coalesced around the time of the assassination of Harvey Milk and the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic. While Language Poetry developed its own politics concerning the need to challenge the centrality of expression to an understanding of poetry (e.g., denouncing bourgeois individualism and the politically sterile assumptions of poetry’s mainstream), the stakes of expression for queer subjects are informed by another set of concerns that produce their own politics. Specifically, queer subjects often must navigate a process of articulation and definition, such as “coming out,” that seems (and might feel) like an act of *self*-articulation or *self*-definition but is nevertheless entangled with the social and historical production of sexuality and identity. Just as New Narrative queered the lessons of Language Poetry to seek a “third position” that might embrace post-structuralism without eliding social difference, Killian’s poetry manifests a queer relationship to that most expressive of literary genres: confessionalism.

According to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, the procedure of confession was used to produce—rather than conceal or censor—a discourse of sexuality from what had been an uncoordinated array of biological and physical experiences. The behaviors that would later be called sex were collated into a more unified discourse of sexuality. This discourse of sexuality would come to reveal the truth of a particular individual, and, following the transformation of sex into discourse, would contain a great chain of perversions and variations surrounding sex. Sex would come to have an

“inexhaustible and polymorphous causal power” (66), and Foucault even takes up the metaphor of exhaustion throughout his *History*. Perhaps the most potent example is this one:

What if sex in our society, on a scale of several centuries, was something that was placed within an unrelenting system of confession? The transformation of sex into discourse, which I spoke of earlier, the dissemination and reinforcement of heterogeneous sexualities, are perhaps two elements of the same deployment: they are linked together with the help of the central element of a confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual particularity—no matter how extreme. In Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning. For us, it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret. But this time it is truth that serves as a medium for sex and its manifestations. (61)

Confession is a literature of exhaustion. Foucault uses the metaphor of exhaustion to explain the procedure by which the truth of the individual is revealed: the discourse of sexuality is produced “exhaustively” even as it is assumed to be “inexhaustible.” Sexuality may be unspooled endlessly from the individual, attached to all number of tellings, behaviors, and positions.

Literature may afford us different ways of being after sex, as variety of creative procedures and voicings not coextensive with confession. However, it is not the case that literature by definition frustrates the confessional procedure. As Foucault suggests, “we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centering on the heroic or marvelous narration of ‘trials’ of bravery or sainthood, to a literature

ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage” (59). Literature, too, can participate in the confessionalism that “exposes” our sexuality to tell the “truth” about us. And in fact, poetry has a longstanding relationship to such confession and confessionalism, one that remains pervasive in popular understandings of poetry.

Though the coinage of Confessional Poetry occurred relatively recently, and though many critiques of confessionalism have been penned in the decades following its emergence, there persists an understanding of poetry as an intimate and direct revelation of personal truth. Returning to the origins of Confessional Poetry highlights the dubious politics of a poetry that insists on personal expression. Inaugurating the term Confessional Poetry, M.L. Rosenthal writes approvingly of Robert Lowell’s “most naked kind of confession,” in his 1959 review of Lowell’s *Life Studies*. He underscores the difference between Lowell’s “unmasking” of himself by way of “a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal” and “the great Romantics who, it is true, spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves” (109). The trope of unmasking continues throughout Rosenthal’s review, with the revelation of shame producing the sincerity, and consequentially the substance, of the speaker. When Rosenthal asserts that Lowell’s “speaker is unequivocally himself,” it cannot be ignored that the mutual grafting of the author and the speaker is not achieved as a given, but through the

expurgation of shame. Such shame motivates Rosenthal's interest in Walt Whitman's homoerotic *Calamus* poems, which Rosenthal writes "took American poetry the very edge of the confessional... in the quivering avowal of his helplessness before the seductions of 'blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch.'" Rosenthal suggests Lowell is extreme in his honesty, going past the edge Whitman suggested in his most scandalous writing.

Rosenthal's focuses his review through two of Lowell's poems: "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" and "Words for Hart Crane." Rosenthal says of the former, "In this monologue the breakdown of traditional meanings and cultural distinctions is dramatized in the frenzy of one contemporary figure. Thus Lowell begins to zero in on his main target, himself as the damned speaking-sensibility of his world" (111). The poem begins:

We're all Americans, except the Doc,  
a Kraut DP, who kneels and bathes my eye.  
The boys who floored me, two black maniacs, try  
to pat my hands. Rounds, rounds! Why punch the clock?... (8)

Though Lowell's monologue is not unsympathetic to the plight of this "Mad Negro Soldier," Lowell's sympathy, as Rosenthal argues, ultimately returns to Lowell himself. So that if the contradictions of the opening statement "We're all Americans" suggest the mutual political position between Lowell and the "Mad Negro Soldier," such sympathy is overturned by the final couplet, "It's time for feeding. Each subnormal boot-/black heart is pulsing to its ant-egg dole." In "Words for Hart



Crane,” as with “A Mad Negro Soldier,” Lowell again casts himself as the abject outsider of US empire, perversely linked, in a provocative inversion of the gay lists so central to later gay and lesbian studies, to a transhistorical lineage of poets of same-sex desire:

Because I knew my Whitman like a book,  
stranger in America, tell my country: I,  
*Catullus redivivus*, once the rage  
of the Village and Paris, used to play my role  
of homosexual, wolfing the stray lambs  
who hungered by the Place de la Concorde. (55)

Rosenthal’s review links these two poems, setting Lowell’s identifications in a heroic contrast to his straight white life. “Crane’s brief, self-destructive career,” he writes, “is seen as the demand of the creative spirit, deliberately wearing the most loathsome mask it can find, for unquestioning love from the culture that has rejected it” (112). In Rosenthal’s estimation, Lowell’s poetry succeeds because it removes the mask that Crane could not—the poem is a laudable unmasking written in “the most savagely committed pitch he can command” (112).

Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* traffics in a complex of disclosure, American nationalism, and a self-serving interest in gay life and Black masculinity. As Rosenthal’s review argues, in Lowell’s *Life Studies* the presence of the homosexual and the Black citizen occasion a meditation on the “disintegration of the world” (110). Significantly, in his recourse to words like “honesty” and “sincerity” to describe Lowell’s procedure of “unmasking,” Rosenthal insists upon Lowell’s poetic

speech as truth telling, one that lets fall a ruined, disintegrated world so that a redeemed, integrated one may emerge. And it is by the process of confession, which assumes the “extreme” positions of the “Mad Negro Solider” and *Catullus redevivus*, that the speaker, and thus the world, will again be made whole. Here we have more than the stereotypical understanding of Confessional Poetry as an advocacy for self-expression. As Rosenthal emphasizes, this isn’t merely poetry, it’s *therapy*—therapy on a national scale, but funneled through the truth-telling of the individual.

Confessional Poetry aspires to nothing less than restoration of a self that might be able to express anything at all, and a nation that can return to the work of empire.

In “Experimental Confessionalism,” Hazel Smith writes about a renewed interest in confessionalism (if not Confessional Poetry), in the wake of Language Poetry’s infusion of post-structuralist critique into the discourse of experimental poetics. Experimental Confessionalism, exemplified by “post-conceptual” poets Felix Bernstein and Trisha Low, draws from and overturns successive strains of experimental poetry—Language Poetry and Conceptual Poetry—both of which, Smith notes, have rebuked outright confessionalism: “Language poetry... questioned the idea of poetry as direct personal expression. Conceptual poetry in turn—through its emphasis on the large-scale appropriation of text—questioned some of the pieties of language poetry, which still placed a value on the style of its author while complicating the notion of voice” (3). So, at least partially, Bernstein and Low return to confessionalism in order, in their turn, to rebuke Language Poetry and Conceptual

Poetry. (On the part of Felix Bernstein, the Oedipal aspect of this turn is folded into the performance, given that his father, Charles Bernstein, is a leading figure within Language Poetry.) Led by Felix Bernstein's *Notes on Post-conceptual Poetry*, a parodic treatise on his and his friends'/contemporaries' poetics, Smith suggests that the return to confessionalism is inspired by social media and a "culture [that] is characterised by public disclosure of private matters in reality TV programs and TV chat shows; news bulletins that often include the expression of raw emotion by people in stressful situations; a sharp rise in the influence of psychology and the growth of counseling." Ultimately, the outgrowth of these aesthetic and technological influences is a poetry that is personal without being confessional. As Smith says of Low's "Confessions," in which the author initiates and then improvises the same confession with four different priests, "One could argue that Low is trying to have it both ways here: she is courting the confessional but at the same time distancing it and conceptualising the first person as a persona." After describing Low's fourth iteration of "her" confession, during which the priest's deviates from the by-then expected response, Smith announces "a significant climax toward the end" borne by repetition with a difference. "The confessional is a genre, like a literary genre," she writes, "one can adhere to the conventions or try to break them. The priest is bending the genre of the confessional, just as Low is arguably taking the piece beyond the genre of conceptualism... [Low's "Confessions"] engages with confessionalism as a genre while also parodying it; it enlists conceptual writing while also moving beyond it."

While the outcome of Confessional Poetry, as Rosenthal has it, is a therapeutic release of shame that can unify the psyche and heal a nation, the politics of experimental confessional poets are stridently otherwise. As Smith estimates, Low's embrace of confessionalism can be seen as a "feminist intervention because it has often been demeaned as women's writing and its critical reception has been 'deeply gendered' . . . ." On the other hand, Bernstein's politics are harder to identify, in part because his poetics are intentionally obscured by a "theorising [that] is often ironic, opaque and deliberately contradictory." While, contrary to Rosenthal's formulation of Confessional Poetry, Bernstein "reject[s] the idea of poetry as healing or easy explanation," the innovations of his writing are not easily articulated to a given political program, and, further, resist the possibility of any and all politics related to identity. Smith, drawing on Bernstein's *Notes*, summarizes the totalizing political horizon that, if one dares to take it seriously, informs post-conceptual writing: "[Bernstein] suggests that true poetic liberation could only ensue if all such movements collapsed, creating not only the death of the author and the death of the text but also 'the death of work'." Bernstein's "death of work," a frustrated vision of utopia, suggests some kind of anti-capitalist politics, a new form of existence in which individuals will no longer be required to (re)produce the truth of their lives through their labor. And, unlike Conceptual Poetry, which challenged the production of "new" work through appropriation, Post-conceptual Poetry would add to that challenge the additional undermining of truth-telling by insisting on the dis-unity of

the individual—across social media, for example. Though basically hopeless, Bernstein, through a serious parody of the confessional procedure, nevertheless hopes to deal “work” a death-blow by corrupting (or revealing the corruption of) truth-telling from the inside out. However, Smith writes, “This... is a possibility that post-conceptual poetry can gesture towards but can never fully embrace, because it is caught up in a seductive and inescapable contemporary culture of branding and celebrity.”

It seems important to think about Bernstein’s aspirational anti-capitalism in terms of sexuality, if only because the poet so exhaustively foregrounds it himself. As his collection *Burn Book* demonstrates, he is so terribly bored by his own sexuality. In his poem “Sexy,” for example, Bernstein writes, “I’m not sexy. / I’m just a striver—indifferent yet ambitious / frigidly waiting for the cum to spray my face / so I can smile and drip and pretend to care” (107). There’s even a kind of instruction manual in “Make Your Own Gay Poem,” which moves between appropriated song lyrics from Scissor Sisters, RuPaul, and *Rent* and short poems and speeches, some with references to other pop stars, gentrification, and hook-ups. The poetry is prosaic and repetitive. Two examples: “We go to the museum. We look at the painting. We pose a feminist critique. We are gay. We go to the museum. We look at the painting. We pose a feminist critique. We are gay” (62); “I’m going to keep talking and standing up for my rights as a Gay American. I’m going to keep talking and standing up for my rights as a Gay American. You can’t make me shut up. I won’t shut up... I will keep talking

and being an activist and being an outspoken liberal and individual because that's how I am and you can't stop me" (65). By collecting such statements under the title "Make Your Own Gay Poem," Bernstein highlights the staid, predictable quality of gay speech, and the lamentable predictability of contemporary homonationalism. "Make Your Own Gay Poem" is a catalogue of gay mediocrity and the banality of sex. "Wow I Smell like cum," Bernstein writes. But this is not the excited "Wow!" of Frank O'Hara, it's the deflated "wow" of millennial boredom. Bernstein suggests that such boredom is perhaps what distinguishes him and his poetry. He concludes his poem, "I annoy you. My parody of gay poetry is so gay. And even its critically reflexive inserts as to the spoiled bourgeois normativity of parodying gay language seem so gay" (70). Bernstein's irony and pop allusions do seem *de rigueur*. This is a poetry that rehearses gay as a *given* sensibility—with an attitude toward sexuality that confirms rather than contests its content, history, and politics. And perhaps this is the historical situation of young people living their queer lives today, when sexuality is no longer experienced as polymorphous or even available to improvisation. The threat of *Catullus redivivus*, an extremity that Rosenthal identified as disrupting the unity of US empire, has been quelled following the increased social and legal acceptance of queer subjects—though, of course, the price for admission for queer subjects has been an assimilation into the compromised social and legal norms of the nation state.

Perhaps a version of an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist politics exists in Bernstein's poetry, submerged beneath layers of irony and cynicism. Conversely, if it

laced the yearning it engenders for another world with a greater dose of cynicism, perhaps utopian poetics would be more credible. Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, predicts such a challenge when he writes,

The dominant academic climate into which this book is attempting to intervene is dominated by a dismissal of political idealism. Shouting down utopia is an easy move. It is perhaps even easier than smearing psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading practices with the charge of nihilism. The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of post-structuralism pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism. Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor. (10)

Not that Muñoz seems to mind these charges, but, at least partially, in order to respond to the antiutopian claim that proponents of utopia are naive, impractical, and lacking in rigor, he attends to art works, performances, and texts that instill a sense of desire for a “then and there.” This longing is inspired by, though not identical to, the concrete utopias glimpsed throughout the history of queer subjects. Significantly, following Ernst Bloch, Muñoz rejects “abstract utopias” in favor of “concrete utopias”: “Abstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized of potential” (3).

Muñoz’s understanding of concrete utopias as “relational to historically situated struggles” provides a manner for distinguishing the differences between Bernstein and Killian’s poetics, even given their partially-overlapping literary lineages, critiques of (homo)normativity, and qualities of being personal without

being confessional. Bernstein's exhaustion with sexuality, and gayness in particular, is a function of a myopic presentness; in Bernstein's *Burn Book* there's no historical consciousness to disturb the given script of sexuality, and there's also very little sense of collectivity. Killian's poetry, on the other hand, is thoroughly saturated with historical consciousness and an excitement about sexuality as a site of ongoing creativity. Killian's double exhaustion—his rushing between the old and new San Franciscos and his practices of collage, which makes room for a community of voices in the place where his own might otherwise be—undermines any nostalgia for another time while simultaneously remembering the sense of a queer utopia on the horizon. To sympathize with Bernstein's frustrated utopianism is to recognize the historically-specific difficulty of younger queer writers who might not be able to conjure the memory of queer utopia but must, instead, look to art, performance, and texts to experience—to hope to experience—that feeling. Muñoz writes,

Hope's biggest obstacle is failure. Hope falters, we lose hope, but we need hope to think otherwise in the face of odds that are stacked against us. In part we must take on a kind of abstract hope [that] is not much more than merely wishing, and instead we need to participate in a more concrete hope, what Ernst Bloch would call can educated hope, the kind that is grounded and consequential, a mode of hoping that is cognizant of exactly what obstacles present themselves in the face of obstacles that so often feel insurmountable. (207)

In the face of despair, poetry can deliver hope. Better yet, poetry can also *educate* the hope that fuels utopian desire—by suggesting the unacceptability of the present through its relationship to other worlds and times, by enlarging the scope of what



might be meant by sexuality and therefore sexual politics, by demonstrating how literature might be loosed from “work.”

Poetry that reflects those qualities Hazel Smith identifies with Experimental Confessionalism—voicings that seem personal but do not claim to reveal the truth of the speaker—provide an analogue for what Foucault seemed to yearn for: a recognition of pleasure as an ever-unfolding creative project only conditionally contained by the discourse of sexuality. In 1982 *Advocate* interview conducted by Bob Gallagher and Alex Wilson, Foucault states,

M.F. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it’s a possibility for creative life.

Q. That’s basically what you’re getting at when you suggest that we should try to become gay—not just to assert ourselves as gay.

M.F. Yes, that’s it. We don’t have to discover that we are homosexuals.

Q. Or what the meaning of that is?

M.F. Exactly. Rather, we have to create a gay life. To *become*. (163)

Explicitly, Foucault does not intend for this becoming, these “new forms of creation,” to be commensurate with a gay literature. Before turning to a discussion of S&M as “a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure,” Foucault specifically calls into question the creativity of “gay novels” (164). Gallagher and Wilson suggest such gay cultural products are suspect because they forward a insidious essentialism, and Foucault

agrees. But his concern is greater, if inarticulate: “What do we mean for instance, by ‘gay painting’? Yet, I am sure that from the point of departure of our ethical choices, we can create something that will have a certain relationship to gayness” (164). When Foucault warns against “a translation of gayness in the field of music or painting or what have you,” it is a reminder that “we should try to become gay,” that gayness cannot be “translated” into art because it continues to evolve—or that to “translate” gayness into art suggests a certain exhaustion of gayness’s creative potential. S&M, on the other hand, is a creative practice that “[insists] that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations,” denaturalizing the conflation of sex and pleasure (165). Though Foucault favors the creativity of S&M to that of gay novels, there’s also an opportunity to consider that the qualities of the former might be present in the latter. Informed by Foucault, the novels of New Narrative are a prime example of a literature related to gayness, though resolutely aware of sexuality’s inventedness and creative potentials. Despite what New Narrative co-founders Bruce Boone and Robert Glück heard as Language Poetry’s calls to abandon narrative, they cleaved to it. As Glück writes, “We did not want to break the back of representation or to ‘punish’ it for lying, but to elaborate narration on as many different planes as we could, which seemed consistent with the lives we led” (17). Similarly, poetry can demonstrate how language might be freed from the utility. Poetry can deliver hope by queering the use of language, by using

language queerly, and making a concrete utopia of speech—producing language that is neither compulsory nor revelatory.

### 3. Nothing Ever Just Disappears: Remembering Queer Theory's New Narrative

On the first page of the last section of *Tony Greene Era* in the poem “Eyes on the Prize,” my name appears. The poem is a quick sketch of the night Kevin and I shared in his apartment in San Francisco in 2012:

The red room of pain and  
—now what were you saying?  
It was all about the heavy headdress Nature made you wear, through  
the sunlit streets of Stockton.  
Eric, tucked into the flower shop, a boy, taking orders on the phone,  
tonight you sit on my armoire, grinning, a gargoyle,  
scars criss crossing your back. (83)

This short poem is part of a series of poems, all titled “Eyes on the Prize,” a literary off-shot of Kevin’s photography project, *Tagged*, which involved various artists and denizens of the literati stripping down (as much as we were comfortable) and placing a set of paper genitals over our own. The poems of “Eyes on the Prize” are all probably written with a particular someone in mind. One is for the prolific gay porn star Arpad Miklos, who committed suicide in 2013. One is for Christopher—Lonely Christopher? Chris Nagler? Others remain a mystery. Though I remember our photo session well, Kevin’s poem still confuses me. I’m not sure how we got on to the topic of “Stockton.” Perhaps we talked about how awful it is, or perhaps it’s something Kevin added to keep me coming back to the poem (even in confusion), or perhaps it’s

just another one of Kevin’s fabrications. I do remember Kevin that night, who so generously paid for our meal at Walzwerk, and I must have told him about the shoulder-length hair I wore as part of my commune days at UC Davis and my childhood memories of working at my mother’s flower shop. I’m embarrassed, even now, to have lines and images from my earliest poetry broken up and assembled among these fragments from our conversations. When I read this poem, I’m overcome by how Kevin’s earliest generosity never ended—continuing to the point that he made room for a novice like me, first in conversation, then on top of his armoire, then in his poetry. After Kevin died, I was asked to speak at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for his memorial service, which was so crowded that people spilled out of the auditorium and into an overflow room and then into the main gallery. I ended my eulogy by invoking the generosity that began our friendship: “I want to acknowledge how important Kevin was as a queer elder, as someone who allowed us younger or less established individuals to see ourselves in relation to those who came before. I can imagine Kevin conjuring up rare magazines and morsels of gossip. *You know, so-and-so would have loved you. You know, you should really read this poet, this book—and here’s my copy.* More gifts from Kevin Killian.”

In 2017 Daniel Benjamin and I organized “Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today,” a gathering of writers and scholars to celebrate and complicate the work of a group of writers that has not often been considered by academic criticism. We sought to build a conference that projected New Narrative in

its own image—with panels and readings supplemented by film screenings, a limited edition broadside, poets theater, a risograph-printed program that included space for autographs, a gallery show, and time for mischief and gossiping. This was an academic conference, sure, but still we endeavored to build for New Narrative’s enthusiasts an ephemeral demimonde that might give us new ways to hold on to the writers and books that have mattered to so many of us.

When I finally worked up the nerve to read “Kevin and Dodie,” the final collaboration between Dodie and Kevin that was passed out by ushers at Kevin’s memorial service, I was so relieved to learn that they considered the conference a success. Kevin wrote, “To an astonishing degree, organizers Eric Sneathen and Daniel Benjamin followed our roadmap of who we wanted to share the stage with us” (122), a compliment I wear on my forehead like an invisible star. “Kevin and Dodie” does include one reservation, that we were not able to reserve enough time to name those members of New Narrative who didn’t live to participate in *Communal Presence*, including Sam D’Allesandro, Bob Flanagan, Lawrence Braithwaite, Steve Abbott, Marsha Campbell, and John Norton. “Ghosts in the smoke,” Kevin calls them (125), bringing to mind the fires that sent down smoke upon Berkeley during the week of the conference. Among the many memories of the conference that linger with me—including Judy Grahn’s heroic reading of “A Woman Is Talking to Death”—is the question of whether or not New Narrative is “queer.” The question came from the audience during a plenary panel organized to celebrate the publication of *From Our*

*Hearts to Yours*, edited by Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw. I improvised an answer, but I felt my response was insufficient, garbled by the obvious. I was pained, on some level, to try to bring together what seemed like such a natural match: queer literature with queer theory. I had read Ariel Goldberg's *The Estrangement Principle*, the most extensive investigation of the relationship between "queer" and New Narrative, in which Goldberg cites New Narrative as an example of "queer" writing that nevertheless "falls through the cracks of gay niche, experimental poetry, and mainstream fiction" (17). And I remembered how Goldberg concedes, "New Narrative, ultimately, was a small group of friends who were making work for each other and *not* a larger audience that tended to be homophobic or bent on cohesive narrative. Exactly how New Narrative slips through the cracks of literary history is cause for both celebration and alarm" (118). Still, for me, the question revealed how academic inquiry and literary history had failed to make ways for readers to hold on to New Narrative. New Narrative and queer studies, literature and theory, may not be commensurate, but what I did not know in 2017 is that in this case they share a common history.

Queer theory and New Narrative scholarship emerged simultaneously at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February of 1990. In the same year that would see the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet*, assistant professor Earl Jackson, Jr. presented his paper "Mapping a Gay Male Imaginary," which climaxed with a close reading of

Robert Glück's first novel *Jack the Modernist*. In her introduction to the special issue of *differences* dedicated to that conference's proceedings, Teresa de Lauretis writes, "The project of the conference was based on the speculative premise that homosexuality is no longer to be seen as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or homology" (iii). Neither their opposite nor their imitation, queer sexualities have their own discourses, cultures, and histories, only partially informed by those of heterosexuality. Further, by using the word queer heuristically, de Lauretis hoped to displace the norms of gay and lesbian studies so that it might better account for racial and gender diversity within the field of sexuality. Compatible with the imperatives of New Narrative, de Lauretis's vision for "this queer theory" suggests a politics of coalition that is nevertheless rooted in a non-essentialist view of sexuality. Including a contribution by Samuel R. Delany, this special issue of *differences* collected many essays that were buoyed by analyses of contemporary poetry, in stark contrast with queer studies' impressively consistent fascination with novels in the decades that have followed. Related to yet distinct from the queer theory stemming from Butler and Sedgwick, de Lauretis's introduction provides some of the tools academics might have put to use to build yet another queer world—poetry and New Narrative among them.

Beginning with Monique Wittig and ending with Donna Haraway, Jackson's citations traverse the "gay and lesbian" divide (an important factor for de Lauretis's

early vision for queer theory). Now retitled “Scandalous Subjects,” Jackson’s article from the Queer Theory issue of *differences* describes the politics informing Glück’s fictions in the idiom of Lacanian psychoanalysis. As a result, Jackson’s claims about the subversive quality of Glück’s prose echo the gendered language of a phallocratic schema, including a femininity associated with being penetrated and a masculinity with penetrating. Jackson suggests that Glück “at once eschews access to the transcendence of the phallus and the unmarked position of absolute truth, through the on-going acknowledgement of the specificity of his body, his desire, and their epistemological consequences” (122). Jackson suggests that just as gay men voluntarily open themselves to the ecstasies of penetration, so too do the narratives of Glück open themselves to a kind of penetration by the world outside of the novel. Jackson brings attention to the embodied quality of Glück’s writing, a positioning that the typical mode of narration often attempts to conceal through objectivity and distance, the means by which the universal substantiates itself. Glück’s politics are informed by an analysis of sexuality and gender that undermines the insidious masculine authoritarianism typical of narrative. Jackson would later transform this article into the final chapter of his monograph, *Strategies of Deviance*—the first academic work on New Narrative and also including the most comprehensive analysis of Kevin Killian’s writing to date.

Earl Jackson, Jr.’s relationship to New Narrative began, deviously enough, by way of Latin and a fortuitous read of *Men on Men*. In his “Sex Writing and New



Narrative” Kevin Killian writes, “George Stambolian kindly provided all the contributors to *Men on Men* with Xerox copies of its reviews. They’re easy to paraphrase, I can do it in two sentences. *Edmund White and Felice Picano, as usual, provide us with the finest stories of their careers. As for the California ‘New Narrative writers, all we can say is, ‘Huh?’*” (292-293). This response may have been true for most readers, but Jackson remembers his personal response to Glück’s “Sex Story” in glowing terms: “By page two I was absolutely riveted. This was several levels above anything I had read yet in terms of experimentation, voice, and sheer audacity with smarts. The contributors’ notes mentioned that Glück still lived in the San Francisco of story. Would I ever get to meet him? Nah. That kind of thing doesn’t happen.” This unlikeliness may have held from the distance of the University of Minnesota, where Jackson was currently finishing his graduate work, but only months later Jackson was teaching at UCSC. It was a neighbor of Jackson’s, Pascale Gaitet (a professor of French literature at UCSC who, coincidentally, was also the partner of poet Nathaniel Mackey), who would fatefully connect Jackson to Glück. It turned out that she, Jackson, and Glück’s current boyfriend were all in the same Latin class in the 1980s. Such serendipity soon enough landed Jackson an invitation to Glück’s house for dinner. Jackson remembers it fondly, “And that was the first time I sat at that dense, comforting wooden table in that warm and comforting kitchen on Clipper Street.”

As an important member of the extended New Narrative crowd of the 1990s, Jackson certainly would have had his share of gossip to peddle in *Strategies*, and yet his criticism eschews spilling the tea in favor of psychoanalytic theory, narratology, and textual analysis. Jackson threads through the writings of Dennis Cooper, Glück, and Killian so that Cooper's influence on Glück, and Glück's subsequent tutelage of Killian, become present formally, rather than merely anecdotally. One example of transmission with a difference that Jackson considers is the three authors' different uses of appropriation, building in complexity from Glück's citation of gay pulp novels like Billy Farout's *Fresh From the Farm* to Killian's appropriation of popular culture that nevertheless "empowers the images in the films and the magazines to express the real emotion and compassion in a culturally legible idiom" (245). The difference, Jackson illustrates, is that Glück's citation remains committed to the community and discourse of a gay subculture, while Killian traffics in high-stakes camp, making marvels out of the detritus of the mainstream. Given that Jackson spends so much time on Killian's work, showcasing him as an important multi-genre author and building connective tissue that stretches from the trio New Narrative writers to the deviant strategies of Samuel Delany, Pedro Almodóvar, and back, further, to Oscar Wilde and Leonardo da Vinci (via Sigmund Freud), I can only wonder what New Narrative criticism would be like today had *Strategies* been received more exuberantly.

Most scholars probably struggle under the weight of such counterfactuals, and it's hard to know why, in this particular case, Jackson's scholarship wasn't embraced. Perhaps it was Lacan, perhaps it was Jackson's sophisticated prose and his quicksilver allusions, or all the porn, or the devastations of the AIDS epidemic, or New Narrative, again, in the role of the bad object. Perhaps it was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick? Jackson vividly remembers a private meeting with her following a queer theory conference in 1992, a meeting that Jackson believes soured the possibilities that *Strategies* might be published by Duke University Press or reviewed in any of the relevant academic journals. Despite this set back, New Narrative over the years has been taken up by a handful of scholars, including Dianne Chisholm, Carolyn Dinshaw, Anthony Easthope, Alan Gilbert, and Kaye Mitchell, and a band of graduates from UC Santa Cruz, including Christopher Breu, Rob Halpern, and Robin Tremblay-McGaw. In their introduction, Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw write, "In a utopian gesture consonant with the clarion call for enhanced community life that marks New Narrative's inception, our hope is that *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice* will spur as-of-yet unheard unimagined conversations and texts, new readers and writers, unanticipated solidarities and camaraderie" (14).

Today scholars can return, with celebration and alarm, to de Lauretis, Jackson, and New Narrative to cruise the archives of utopia, an ideal made famous by José Esteban Muñoz. Almost twenty years before the publication of Muñoz's *Cruising*

*Utopia*, the subject of utopia punctuated de Lauretis's introduction to the special issue of *differences*:

Each in its own way, the essays recast the terms of the discourses they engage to expand or shift their semantic horizons and to rethink the sexual in new ways, elsewhere and other-wise. This elsewhere is not a utopia, an otherworldly or future place and time. It is already here, in the essays' work to deconstruct the silences of history and of our own discursive constructions, in the differently erotic mappings of the body, and in the imaging and enacting of new forms of community by the other-wise desiring subjects of this queer theory. (xvi)

De Lauretis stresses that utopia is not else-where but already extant by way of "the essays' work." Some might read in de Lauretis's emphasis an anti-futurity akin to that of Lee Edelman's *No Future*. But what if "this queer theory" has also fallen through the cracks? The dreams of "this queer theory," like New Narrative itself, still stir up feelings of discontent with the status quo—and not only with what queer theory has become or what literary history has obscured. And, again like New Narrative, de Lauretis's queer theory—stressing exchange across epistemological divides, committed to a critique of "white gay historiography," and abundant with poetry—might have thrown down something scholars have yet to really pick up. For Muñoz (and Goldberg), that the horizon of queerness remains "a horizon imbued potentiality," should not be read as a loss, but be valued for its oneiric, antagonistic effects: "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (1).

In the wake of Kevin Killian's death, something is certainly missing. His absence reminds us that, yes, this world is not enough; it is his legacy and our memories of him that now propel many of us precisely in the manner that Muñoz describes, onward and beyond. And though it felt sudden, looking back, he did warn us that he would disappear. Killian laid out the whole act in his essay "Poison":

I'm standing on a flat plain, and then, or so it seems, a little hole appears in the sand ahead of me (like in that movie *Tremors*?). The hole grows larger in diameter—this is my sanity, and all the little pieces of me of my sanity are breaking up and slipping down into the hole... (92)

[All] the things I brought with me to this valley are in my trailer, fifteen yards behind. And one by one I lose them down the ever-expanding hole—cans, jars, movie magazines, photos, food and books. The hole keeps caving in on itself. My little home on wheels is silver, rounded like the new Volkswagon models, and drives like a dream. Its doors shear off with a sudden crunch of metal, bright in the noon air, they slither across the desert floor into the hole. I'm next perhaps—hold on to me. (101)

Killian gave us so many ways to hold on to him, including the laughter he shares with us over *Tremors*, that tacky film about gigantic earthworms wreaking havoc in Perfection, Nevada. Killian loves a disappearing act, and, as Jackson pointed out in *Strategies* with respect to Killian's use of a Judy Bolton mystery novel in his first novel *Shy*, Killian installs pop culture in the exhausted heart of his fictions, allowing us to recover experience with both sentiment and wonder. Likewise, in his final novel, *Spreadeagle*, Killian disappears behind the narrator Kit, who talks on the phone with a sick, house-bound Sam D'Allesandro about the emotionally overwrought film

*Beaches*. Kit tries to remember when they went to the Alhambra Theater to see it, and Sam says, “When we were together... It couldn’t have been that long ago, could it? I don’t remember me and you seeing that movie, Kit. But it was all about how, when a person dies, part of them still lives on as long as the other one has wings to live and fly away” (92).

Killian also communicates with Sam D’Allesandro in “Sex Writing and the New Narrative,” which alternates between Killian’s essay and D’Allesandro’s story “Nothing Ever Just Disappears.” At the first Out/Write conference, Killian read his essay from the front of the auditorium, and Bruce Boone, their mutual friend and teacher, read D’Allesandro’s portion from the back. The notes for this performance and D’Allesandro’s lasting impression on Killian constitute the entirety of the notes on Killian’s “Sex Writing,” which are included in the appendix of *Writers Who Love Too Much*. Again, Killian disappears into gestures of remembering, refocusing our attention to include the many who might have otherwise fallen outside of the spotlight. In their poem “I Hope I’m Loud When I’m Dead,” CA Conrad writes,

poetry  
can be  
of use  
the field of flying  
bullets the hand  
reaches through (2)

Queer theory and literary scholarship, too, can be used, can be made rich with gestures of great generosity that allow us to hold on to what is dear and vital as we

continue to reach for utopia. As queer theory and New Narrative are pronounced from opposite ends of the same auditorium, they allow us to hold on to what might otherwise slip through the cracks, those voices calling out, “hold on to me.”

Minor Work



## You Can Hurt Me

A wind upon your skin with subtlety  
I can rule you. By my brown eyes'  
Sparkling I can seduce the horizon  
Into a curl of lips and possibilities.  
You can hurt me even when the talk  
Is flat or banal, or the trashcan's  
Mostly empty and the maple leaves  
In the courtyard move like birds  
Or better. Like a charm of finches  
I'm not trying to understand, which  
Bugs you, that I can be so aloof  
When you're in the throes of love  
With me. I can hardly help it—  
What radiates in the in-between  
Of us, and I'm not even listening.

And I Don't Want To Be Hurt

People deserve some drama to fold  
Back against their own bright star.  
I'd like to start now with yearning:  
To start with the big sun blowing  
You this kiss, the string of hearts  
Sparkling, the inscrutable icons  
Of our age. I want to start the day  
By exhausting work and normalcy  
Again it's nuclear war and plague  
Getting personal. I didn't mean to  
Be plainspoken as the day fades  
Itself brilliantly. The future arrives  
While I pet Agnes around her ears.  
I press each one of the black pads  
Of her feet to count it back to ten.

Minor Work

That day's behind me. In our apartment  
Now with Agnes and the door  
Growing colder, I bought flowers today.  
The florist called them "wild anemones."  
Knowing no such thing exists, I feed  
The cat who makes her demands, climbing  
Up on my shoulders and licking my neck  
Hairs. She's lonely. She plucks the fibers  
Of my everyday shirt, indigo, perhaps  
Shredding it, but I haven't yet seen  
Much evidence of any real destruction.  
Real disintegration takes its time, a lot  
Has happened this month alone. Fuck.  
The dishes unwashed, the Pyrex not quite  
Clean again, I love you but you're shit  
At applying a bit of soap and water.  
When sponging up the countertop  
Dawn adds its chalky haze to flutes  
And tumblers, it rings every picture of you

Slowly setting in the speckled petals  
Of hellebores. You'll say, It's too beautiful  
What you hate in language—  
That shame may come back to your aid  
In your very own image. I've seen you  
Sleeping and lost my place easily.  
I've skipped a few pages and the dishes  
Got done. I live my life here  
As if you'll return at any rate to tasks  
To be done and no mice, it's clean  
Enough today. And strange about cats.  
Agnes might nudge my ankles or casually  
Stomp on my junk with an intimacy  
Quietly profane, her disregard on the way  
To my chest. It needs kneading, the buzz  
Of purrs after a simple day of labor  
For strangers. How well she teaches me  
Without much of a word at all:  
Where to put whiskers or a pink nose  
In urgency, making sounds and pleasure  
And sleep, this great attraction

To my enemies and movement, even flight,  
Insufficiency and emptiness, a little  
Walks away with Agnes. I'm asleep  
Now it's night while Taylor sings  
"Tell It To My Heart" blown out  
Hair, piles of books crowding everything  
In sight. One more shock of glamour  
I'll never heed, but it's no waste.  
The way you'll raise your eyebrow  
To me, as if to say you know me better  
Than all this. But I'm not sure you do.

Gloria

Perhaps it will be ending soon  
Everything heated by its breath  
Breathing in violence as roses  
Fall in their colors from the sky  
I know this ghost is still alive  
Inside my veins branching out  
Leaves made pink by the sky  
Perhaps I can bend it back  
Like a face I can make it leak  
The stream begins with a tear  
The chords of orange in clouds  
The cord of wood in the sky  
That my lungs have gathered  
A thick bundle of it together  
Sky opaque as skin with ash  
I can bend it maybe or pull it  
Back like the head I hold from  
Glory to the petals collecting  
The oxygen & sun & water

The tip of hibiscus points up  
Into the firestorm fearlessly  
The tangerine-grey of the air  
I think some people are against it  
The notes of trumpets floating  
Over all of this & red fireworks  
Still going all through summer  
It must be a sign someone needs  
A shocking burst of fading color  
I am with the people up against it  
Bending its terror into marigolds  
The gold & the rust of the petals  
I took a boutonniere into my heart  
& then the cloudy stream & the sky  
I am in the world that gathers it  
Together I make a breath & blow

## Cat Cardio

I play with Agnes with pink feathers  
Hanging at the end of a plastic wand  
Like you said I should. Just like me  
She leaps into the sentimental paper  
Bag, gets so scared, and leaps away.  
Her whiskers lengthen and the grey  
Washes out into white. You worry  
She's upset and not active enough.  
We've talked about it. What's next  
Falls down over me like the blonde  
Hairs of you. It's gentle: some inner  
Resource or an imaginary friendship  
That jumps up into my bed at night.  
Our love gets older chasing fantasy  
And I pick her up and we talk a bit.



## Clever Girl

On our walk you said every poodle  
Look hideous, like a used-up Swiffer  
Pad. I couldn't argue with the blossoms  
As they canopied above us. The waxy  
Leaves of camellias still holding dark  
While the ruined pile of petals were  
A carpet for a while. Your contempt's  
A neon-colored fan that clacks down  
When it snaps open, I'm that helpless.  
I'm that Australian guy in Jurassic Park  
Whose skills include khaki, brutality,  
And a deep respect for life. He sets up  
His rifle slowly, stares at the velociraptor.  
It's distracted or something. There's all  
These palm trees and tropical noises.  
And still it's a bit of a shock. The other  
Dinosaur then surprises him to death  
In a pincer attack he had predicted  
In the first place. I think, sometimes,

Of us like that? When we're home  
And Agnes comes along, to perch on  
The linoleum and stare at the wall  
Blankly. When she does nothing at all  
My guard is down and I relax into  
A big assumption about where things  
Are going. Fine? Dinner's almost done.  
You're so sweet and it eats me up alive.

## Wonderful And All My Nothing

I am not a warm laughter or solitude. This is  
Not my relationships as the palm fronds clap  
Together in a balmy breeze. I am not the smell  
Of my grandma's metal skin or the loam shining  
In fields. No trace of footprints or freshly fallen  
Snow. He won't dip his toes into the nocturnal  
Lake of naked frog song and reeds. This can't  
Hear it: the water cascading over the edge,  
The heartbeat that's racing when my body's  
Pressed with love. I didn't say, "You taught me  
Something, something I needed to hear that I  
Didn't know I needed." Food made with love,  
I'm not. I won't be Miguel or friendly flourishes  
Playing football (as in soccer). This isn't my son  
Or my wife or my work refined into a postscript  
I write out to the horizon. It isn't helpful: a lot  
Of trees already dead, still standing there like  
Grandpa's old jokes and candies. Peonies unlatch  
From my own need for something magnificent.

I'm not a breakfast table our cat sits down for  
Her lot in life, the powder of brown pellets  
Stuck to her patient lips. I figure my no-good  
Attitude is my signature. I can't flatten worlds  
Or even a bouquet of commas—to send up  
A colon lets the air breathe through grammar.  
All my failures: to make sex, to take an SSRI.  
Conceptually speaking, I'm not just a body  
Of water, a significant aberration stepping off  
Stones. I can't bench myself in a busy terminal  
To watch the people scatter and rearrange  
Stories about what's next as the blood keeps  
Turning over its leaves in you. It won't be clear  
The day after calling in sick but not actually being  
Sick. OK, I'm not being honest about who I am.  
I don't resist the cloister, untangling knots,  
The masks other hands have made. I can't be  
Alone for hours and hours if you aren't here  
With me again. It doesn't unsound the bell  
Of you, but let me try again. When no one spreads  
Justice out like a picnic of summer berries

And melons. No changing things into better,  
Flipping reality like a snow globe gets flipped.  
When a friend drops a banner or asks to fuck  
Something up in coordinated efforts this thing  
Can't ask. Not a worry in the stores of memory,  
The Paris of every moment I walk through each  
One of my languages, reflexively. I don't myself.  
Didn't you take a shower after fisting me like  
That? No sleep in the wormhole out of doors,  
All day in sun, which isn't where I've made it.  
Uncorking some distant power, histories gone  
Up through my spine. I wasn't there to count  
The taps of his boots, but I've been close, like  
Dirty plates at summer camp, layer upon layer.  
But the rain can't conjure the specific after-  
Word of petrichor, damp and warm under  
The patches of needles, no steam from autumn  
Storms. Each part of my mouth fails each part  
Of every word as it passes the throat, tongue,  
Teeth vibrate and click to cut the sound into  
Shapes. Like your name, the one you rise

To hear, your mother's second or third name  
I won't trace it, lightly. His brow to my fingers  
I don't fall in love when I'm not supposed to.  
Could be everyday, but I can't. I won't fight to  
Paint light or despair written through morning  
With hot black coffee, orange sheets in bed.

North Bay

I can't be near you today

When I'm writing I need

A universe of space. It's real

What I see among all

The boys' fluttering asses

Peeling into the ocean's

White crashing surge. Three

Of them are so young

It seems they're twenty-ish

With a yappy German

Shepherd and the biggest stick

A tree trunk I think

The coastal sage breaking

Down into the pebbles

Of this beach. What is it

Saying all this time

Insistently about itself

With that perfect surge

And the green tint

On the crest of each  
Wave swinging over itself?  
The wind gushes down  
These cliffs like honey  
And into the spray  
Little puffs of vape smoke  
Rise from the sea cave  
On the far side from here.  
It's difficult to get there,  
I need to go by language  
Or through an image.  
There is a power I think  
That some of us do not resist  
So completely. Not always.  
Two teens are climbing  
Over the loose rocks  
To look down the strand  
Of us naked and pinkly  
Reposed, then they walk  
Right out from here.  
There's an island of herons



In hundreds of feathers  
Picked up by the cool  
Drafts coming off the waves.  
There's not a lot of story  
In the world but fishermen  
Taking photos of you  
Coming up from the water.  
I can hear the sound  
From here of maybe millions  
Of little grey crustaceans  
Becoming the sandy shore.

## Helping Hand

There is something I can do I'm sure  
I can take a cantaloupe to my nose  
To search out its spicy fragrance  
And test its skin for bruises and give  
When the skin gives way I can mend  
It with my attention and bandages  
And the ointments I can apply them  
If you need me to, if you want me to  
I can sing pop songs in the voice  
Of Cookie Monster or The Count  
This is the way I can cheer you up  
This is a circle I can make a vow  
When I am standing here and you  
Are over there with the cat between  
Us who know her faces and moods  
When her ears are angled backwards  
Or she chirps at the hummingbird  
We too notice the color of its plumage  
She gets us to look out the windows

We rarely look into the apartments  
Anymore to see those other people  
And their sleeping cats and TV sets  
The one across from us, before she  
Moved out, did she finish *The L Word*?  
Or *The Magicians*? Some of my favorite  
Shows are exceedingly awful I think  
When you're in the adjoining room  
Listening to your record collection  
(Franco Nanni, Marion Brown, *Finis  
Africae*) with your headphones on  
There's this other sound in my head  
It's a song strong enough to rotate me  
Back to the dance floor even when  
The disaster has closed the lights  
And I can't see anyone's face anymore  
(Like in that movie *Independence Day*  
When the aliens position themselves  
Over the United States Bank Building  
Upon which dozens of Americans—  
Including one stripper—have assembled

To greet the alien ships who destroy  
Them in a great blast from the cosmos)  
There is a song like “Gloria” or  
“I Want to Dance with Somebody”  
Pushing me completely over the edge  
Which is where you are and our life  
Keeps going whether or not that voice  
Is mine or the fragrance or hands  
That hold it together a little longer  
Are the ones that touch me here I try

## You're Great

Just be honest about the cups & plates  
& the length of the day in its brightness  
In the neighbors' kitchen the amaryllis  
Shooting up petals in the neighbors' pot  
There's something you're not telling me  
An expression like the oil an olive weeps  
& there may be more that voices carry  
Each time you take my hand & laughter  
On this side of the television Agnes dims  
Her eyes when she's completely at peace  
When I pick her up to jiggle her belly  
& search the internet for hummingbirds  
& squirrels she seems to adore the noise  
Of what seems to be right in front of us  
The moving screen of this life together

Basically

Questions. All my piles. Food particles

In the drain. I'd say it's alphabetized.

Obviously. His eyes, hair, and beard.

Sparkle. His drag versus his wardrobe.

Showgirls and champagne. Riverdale.

There's a graphite portrait by Charles.

You know. If we moved. The furniture.

The records would have more room.

The oven doesn't work. The screws

Falling out of the dining room table.

I love our place. I want only a certain

Amount. Even more. Keep pouring.

Deep and low. When you are near me.

There's no pots or pans. Help me out.

Or I can do the worst. Part for you.

Compersion

You can turn that page

Into a lake you know

I have no big answers

Only living my life

By bringing my force

Down upon myself

I'd crack each egg

Against the small bowl

As my own instrument

To get at something

Protean and unseen

The golden evidence

Of a verdant elsewhere

Where his hands are

Whisking you away

Soft-scrambled fingers

I can imagine you now

As the animals stalk

And scent one another

A sun crosses the sky  
Eliciting such pleasure  
For snails and kittens  
Indifferent to love  
Each making their way  
Through the leaves  
Across town the morning  
Glory wrapped his hands  
Around your two legs  
Familiar and strong  
Each face of yourself  
In the immodest roses  
Hatching their blush  
Natural as the water  
When it soaks through  
A signature of pages  
Or this morning canvas  
Before it's broken open  
I must touch each egg  
To see the yolk as a sun  
I'm offering this image



Transmuting metaphor  
I'm swimming in the lake  
We've made it together  
A bit of pain in the world  
Where the sun keeps us  
Honest there's a limit  
To all this they say  
But I haven't found it yet

Ricky

One taught me love. One taught me  
Patience for the end of everything  
And singing just one more season  
For the body of the one I'm loving.  
I was inspecting parts of a tragedy  
Lightly stubbled. And as painful  
As it was, I couldn't stop learning  
About love. When the cat returned  
I was touching his Adam's apple  
Or my friend said It will be alright  
I cried, of course, and everything  
Felt made for loving. The tragedy  
Kept talking to me like a season:  
The weather and flowers singing  
It's alright now I listen and laugh.

January 31, 1989

I wake to wiggle out my tiny pill.  
Each morning I drown it with tap  
Water. I wash myself with ghosts.  
I am full of such weeping things:  
Citations, language, and memory  
Salivate me into the late morning  
And don't let it go. We were dying  
So we stopped the Golden Gate  
Bridge. We stretched the banner  
Wide to say, We won't let us go.  
See us as we drop the page. Look  
There's people out there, fucked  
Like an emerald is fucked by green.  
It takes my hands to take its shine.  
Take its green, right here, from me.

## Castro And Market

Someone restored me by their brush  
Into the sky the boys can fall in love  
Under and the cats roll around in dirt  
For the sake of cleanliness. Someone  
Hoisted themselves up on my roof,  
Sweaty. They retouched the ornaments  
Pulsing with my heart's quickening  
Beat, the red of their Adam's apple  
Overcome by the colors of my body.  
The flesh and follicles they're tracing  
My chest into quatrefoils, like a window  
Into their own past, where the screen  
Still flickers with Judy and Natalie  
In that gold theater on Castro Street.  
They cry for them and the past because  
They remember what happened here.  
They took the heat from Eureka Valley  
And the police raids of San Francisco.  
Covered by bank loans for bachelors,

The boys planted shaggy zinnias, blue  
Buttons, and those tacky little pompoms.  
(You remember their names.) Each house  
Refined into a torch, a beacon taunting  
The straights with shocking pinks and teal,  
Impossible maroons trimmed with gold  
Accents. Each house like a fancy FUCK  
YOU painted in the summer of 1976.  
Those were the boys with blue slips  
Or less from the war. You can tell me  
The myth one more time as the color  
Falls from your crown to flush your neck  
And chest with ecstasy. Call it utopia,  
Liberation: all that nowhere before all this,  
I promise I was in there, too. In the yard  
Of waving yellow bells, the faded pages  
Falling golden from a broken spine.  
Come back to me. This hallway so long  
My two fingers reach out to the animal  
Gleam of your teeth and withered gums.  
Your body I drag down into the sweaty

Exchange of Street Fairs and that  
Light in the air, circle jerks and spells,  
All the tightness you felt locked into,  
Arm in arm with those bearded explorers  
With faces of bright ribbons and clover.  
Tattered and torn, read us our book  
Won't you? When my eyes are gone  
Also. Tell me what the window says  
About the world outside. I pass it  
To hear the world like a picture:  
Mute, perhaps, but full of potential.  
I remember feeling old, being young,  
Such strange letters and signs,  
Odd linguistic combinations of which  
Houses have long been made. I went  
To the window. I read from this house  
To remember him, his book. He opened.

Minna Street

No more waking up on Minna Street. No  
Waking up to Kevin's underwear when  
I found his whitey tighties pawing at me,  
The raw cotton of his briefs like coffee  
Helping me up to the possibilities of light,  
How it might be rubbed into the crevices  
Of my own body or spit out like bile.  
I was there taking care of Ted and Sylvia,  
And the oldest cat whose name runs  
Away right now. I remember her anyway,  
Her unexpected purring as I stuck her  
With the needle of the I.V. drip, cutting  
Through a field of exposed pink skin.  
I check my e-mails from seven years ago,  
And I see again her name was Quincey.  
She was Dodie's mother's cat and sick.  
It was for her that I came home at night,  
To the home of my new friends, Dodie  
And Kevin who wrote in their Cat Manual,

Appended with the latest of his poems:  
We come back Sunday evening so all  
Will be well. Kevin will feed the cats  
Before he leaves on Friday morning,  
You don't have to come until evening  
I read and my responsibilities began.  
I mixed her powder into the wet food  
And disposed of all their piss and shit.  
Negotiating medicines, I held her firmly.  
Quincey, still purring, stirred something  
In me in the quiet made by Minna Street.  
And later I'd read old tabloids, Juliana's  
Chapbook (Nuclear), I tried to appreciate  
The art of friends I'd come to call mine  
In the future: Cliff and Scott, Nayland,  
Darrell, and Glen and Elliot: a group pic  
Of 90s art fags, their crap was everywhere.  
Should they poop on the living room rug,  
There's two cleaners (we've left them on  
The kitchen table): a nontoxic cleaner  
I mix up in a squirt bottle that reads



“Ecodiscoveries,” and another squirt bottle,  
“Clean ’n’ Smart.” It’s strange what I did  
For my heroes, I guess. Cat sitting  
Gave me something terrible to aspire  
To, like sleeping my way through a crowd.  
As the night carries on SOMA wakes up,  
Scattering windshields and reckless  
Lovers making their cover in doorframes.  
I think I hear someone falling to pieces:  
The tears falling away from my body,  
They become individuated, material facts  
Of the world—that it’s variegated by loss,  
Dappled like the light in an old Renoir,  
By which we can say everyone looks in  
Different directions when it comes to love.  
When it comes to being a sick kitten,  
When it comes to rending their garments  
In a fit of bereavement, I have been one  
Of those women, too, shredding cotton  
Blends, drooling, pressed in by the weight  
Of death. I’m straining to feel the satin

Petals of its bloom, soft as the membrane  
Surrounding the hole in me and passed  
Around like a fuckboy. Gaping violently  
My mouth gives just a hint of what is  
Happening. When I'm on the telephone  
I'm calling so many friends who might be  
The ones I still need, the ones who stay  
In San Francisco till the very end of days.  
And when I think of it, the end of days,  
I think of all the unlucky who will never  
Know what it's like to be woken up  
By Agnes's mewling or Quincey's purr  
As she's filled with fluids beneath softly  
Furred skin. I also think of the lucky, those  
Never to have to experience what we will,  
The no water, the no food, the no comfort,  
No safety, no sleep, no real Earth left on  
Earth, where Kevin and Quincey are gone.  
No more waking in the commune's tighty  
Whiteys, no. No more I love you's, Annie  
Sings, Oh oh. I'll not wake up on Minna

Today, surrounded by the old apartment,  
The one I was invited into to strip down  
And get up on Kevin's wardrobe. Carefully  
I hit my head on his San Francisco ceiling,  
Filled with the dots and stains of decades.  
I fell asleep, I swear, to Kevin taking photos  
Of me naked on the couch in that living  
Room where he asked, instructed me, Eric,  
Can you leave your butt a little more  
Exposed? I'll arrange over you a red blanket  
Artfully like a Venus is not the comparison  
He would make. Not a marble, I'm no Barberini  
Faun leaning back into the sunshine, my torso  
Taut as the curls that crown me, nipples pert,  
The slumber sloughing off. I'm another fading  
Star, a bit actor playing parts for the studio  
System's big bucks, trying it scene after scene.  
I'll remember the gifts of that night, the dark  
Red lilies. I left them on the kitchen counter  
Exploding their sex organs. Lilies "crack open,"  
Another dimension of the drama of the living.

I put memories somewhere they don't belong  
When I have the chance to preserve myself.  
When I have the chance, I'll call life cat sitting,  
As I feed that rascal swimming through shag  
Carpet. Gorgeous, my grief, I give her comfort  
Beneath the skin of her. Beneath the darling  
Skin of death, there's a pageant of coins  
And gestures, a glass bead game, a black  
River pushing around bones in an ancient cup.  
Beneath the skin of death, another friend  
I made to retrieve something more of myself.  
It's as much as I can do—and I'm not leaving  
All that power behind in the grave. I wake  
Up on Minna Street only a dozen times in life.

## Ovid's Revenge

Like a fistful of rare gems on silk  
You scattered me into a mountain.  
I've gone wild with jackrabbits  
And golden poppies. The coyotes  
Loping through the manzanita  
And bear grass we have passed.  
It's right to be called to action  
In a way that binds us, pinching  
Our sentiments together tightly.  
Hands touch. A word exchanged.  
It becomes an arrow oriented  
Outward. It becomes something  
Else while I'm stealing blankets  
To be obnoxious. I take it all back  
And more to make it even better.

## I Want To Dance With Somebody

For pleasure, stick your fingers  
Into your own ass, and you can  
See how that feels. You either got  
To practice or you don't have to.  
I'd argue that I cannot know  
Anyone else's queerness. I try  
To access only my own inside.  
Warped by experience, these  
Unexpected turns of phrase,  
I was like the drunken summer  
Beetles gone with the warmer  
Currents, swarming. Bobbing  
And floating funny, I mean  
I was multiple and naturally  
Part of the ecosystem of bad  
Ideas. I was gleaming, bright  
With Boy Butter in the pools  
Of Palm Springs. In the alleys  
Behind bars, the dense bushes

Of national parks, I was exiting  
Shining and suppler, heeding  
The urgent calls for more  
And more, or was it more  
Political to tell you about it?  
Well, this was all years ago,  
So I told everyone about it all.  
The closet had been a realism  
Staked around me. It was a net  
That could only keep me alive.  
Caught inside, I flopped around  
Inside it. That's what it felt like,  
Those were the class politics:  
Everything was ready for me  
To go, but I didn't. I went out  
Like a geometrician's ray:  
An infinite line that explodes  
Its single coordinate among  
The nebulae. In the misty blue  
Distance, I've seen you there  
In padding and vintage Mugler,

The star of your life streaming  
Right by me, screaming fashion  
And verve. You're flying across  
The gulf between Oakland and SF  
When BART's just about to close  
The night, but we want to live.



Sagittarius

What art has ended all suffering  
On this our only earth? I want to  
Think about the love we'll never  
Have all of it. I want to change.  
So let me change. This can be  
That language, the new lightning  
I can make with a red-hot throat.  
There's this ring of fire & you  
Want to know if you're in it,  
& if it's not just a metaphor,  
What then? There are people  
Under this bridge. & there is  
Wealth under that. To read it  
Like a question in a book, I am  
A glove & a big box & a sparrow.

## All My Cats

Is a pretty good book

By Bohumil Hrabal (trans.

From the Czech by Paul

Wilson) in which he describes

In lush, elliptical prose

His murdering his cats

By swinging them against

A tree, stuffed in a bag

Even those ones he loves

Like Blackie, “the cat

With the white feet

And the white bib.”

His wife keeps asking him

“What are we going to do

With all these cats?”

She’s a minor character

But gives the book

Humor and philosophy

Which redeem the central

Conflict about killing  
Cats. I've wanted to share  
This passage with you  
So I'm quoting it here:  
"And then I remembered  
A moment captured in news-  
Papers from 1911, when  
The Turks massacred  
A village, cut off the heads  
Of their enemies, their  
Victims, put them in sacks  
And took them to the city  
And then had their picture  
Taken with the severed  
Heads. Likewise American  
And South Vietnamese  
Soldiers had themselves  
Photographed after they had  
Beheaded their victims,  
And they'd stuck cigarettes  
In their lips, just as I had

Thrown each of the kittens  
A red geranium.” (Forgive  
The long quotation, but  
There was no better way.)  
I was in bed after that  
Thinking about America,  
The brutality this wealth  
Was won by genocide  
That has never been ceased.  
To use the passive voice  
In this way, to recognize  
(At least) that human agency  
Maintains systems of violence  
Is a very small thing. I try  
To start somewhere before  
Sleeping takes over. Agnes  
Meows at the foot of our bed  
And then lifts herself up  
On the side of the frame.  
She jumps all the way  
Up into bed with the two

Of us who have had our day,  
Long and tedious and silly  
As it was. It's not something  
We deserved, and it exhausted  
Us in any case. We're not  
Yet dreaming as Agnes  
Strolls back up and down  
The length of our bed.  
When she settles on my arm  
You reach over to pet her  
And she purrs and closes  
Her eyes with a soft pleasure.  
The books keep piling up  
On your side of the room:  
Art in America, two volumes  
Of Ping Pong, Goodbye, Dragon  
Inn, Writing in Space,  
A College Mystery, Shroud  
For a Nightingale, two novels  
By George Mac Donald,  
Lydia Davis's Swann's Way

(Which we meant to read  
Aloud together as we fell  
Asleep during the pandemic),  
The Secret Life of Puppets,  
Eleanor, or the Rejection  
Of the Progress of Love,  
Spaces Like Stairs, Work  
Won't Love You Back,  
The White Dress, The Skin  
Chairs, Cruel Optimism,  
My Mother Laughs, and,  
Finally, Entangled Life.  
You've got such great taste.  
It's cute and kinda a lot,  
But that's what you are  
Doing on your side  
Of things. I respect it  
And admire you for it.  
At a loss as we are  
For imagining connection  
In the contours of narrative,

For feeling and recreation,  
I don't think you'll have  
Time to read All My Cats,  
Though I wonder if you'd  
Even like it, given the state  
Of the world we're in  
And the murdering of cats.  
The steady traffic hums  
Along the freeway. Nearby  
You've shifted your weight  
And we all three move  
With it, finding a balance.  
Agnes tucks herself into  
Me and my scent more  
Deeply than before. She  
Moves my hand under  
Her neck so that I begin  
To stroke her vibrating  
Throat. She lets herself  
Ascend, lifting her chin  
Until at last she's reached

As far as she can, vulnerable  
And trusting me again  
To do the right thing  
And keep going for as long  
As I can. I keep petting her.  
Before other dreams  
Rush in I want to tell  
You (but you're sleeping)  
About how it all ends.



Don't Leave Me This Way

Telemachy

You say to the boy open your eyes

Wind. Weather. Of the deep rigging. Repeatedly

How frail our ship our waves. Spill. There. Thread

Of sails on the lips. Held steady. I rub my eyes

The bad weather ahead love. There. So they did.

They poured libations to the passing of a shadow.

Salt lips touching. Marbled fingers. Weather. Night

Oars. The score of wing beats there. Kiss me.

Repeatedly dusk. The smell of him then the crew.

Horrible wind. Sun. So our ship smashed into bits.

Purple waves. The quick black ship. Is everlastingly.

There. Love. Clouds waded boldly out into day.

We fall. Was splashing tossed companions. Sun

Scattered stubble. Little ship. Love's gleaming sky.

I place a delphinium till dawn the ship sailed on.

When he opens his eyes and sees the light

In coral harbors. In azure seas no longer yet.

The island dawn the sky. Scattered into birds

The night. My hull. The night fell from heaven.

We stayed there for two days listening to birds

Who built upon our hearts sky & sea. Pushing

Off in beauty's summer. The tackle down deep

With ropes and boarded. The mast making it

Tangible. Teal birds. The sun transforming

Itself into. The clouds gathering a blue of bliss.

Love. It was a small island little ship his body.

To seize the tip and land began. The island

Till dawn. Filled the cups with wine. Sparks

On the eyes around his ankles. Little ship

Through the night. Peony. The color of stars.

You make him cry out

The paths will catch us unawares. Ocean deep  
Seagulls among them. Tempest. The saltwater  
Aching waves invade us. A raft is circling  
The sea grew dark beneath it. Broken back-  
Wards. Teeth chattering. Frosted with waves.  
A wave crashed onto him. The rudder slips  
Blue skies submerged. Thundered fractured  
Darkness. One enormous gust. Reach the surface  
The raft. A sun they were swept away. Love.  
The sun is weeping a rolling gale. Sea birds  
Lay in shadows. Then the men fell overboard.  
Over sideways his skull. The night's unending.  
Sails and rowed with all our doom. We fly  
Blasting. Whirling bolts. Seagulls in the waves.

Saying

Says I can remember him. Sitting on the sea.  
A man whose heart was full and rotating oars.  
Not yet gone or Spring. Stay. Flowers. Stay  
Inside. Open out of his mouth. The peony  
Kisses the. Little ship. And climbed up above  
Wind. Exhausted. A shadow always weather.  
The fish filled the sea and murmured with life.  
Clearing the water. From. Out of his mouth  
Kisses and. Greedy lips slow blue loving.  
He comes in waves and waves. Of this threat  
Sways on. The blue heat be ever butterfly.  
The blue thistles clung to life. Singing days.  
I. Unfurled the shining sails. And I. Inside it.  
Love is lifted. I wept that raft across the sea.

I Fill This Room with the Echo of Many Voices

His sandy hair just so. He's inviting me

Gaétan stripped off his t-shirt and fished  
Out an obstacle, his gentle French accent,  
A music. A gas was just starting. Gaétan  
Like you've imagined him, walking backward,  
Plunging the deep indigo of two mouths,  
Four flanks hypnotically. He has left his face,  
His sandy hair just so. He's inviting me  
With a shifting of buttocks. Remember me.  
Remember the roil of bathhouse mercury,  
The chills. Remember fucking, that shame  
And joy must be fucked. Rhythms of disco,  
Yes. Yes, all night. He edged me in the sand,  
Such an unusual appellation who spread  
The door shut. Our summer's just begun.



Gaétan's perfect finger draws this cluster

Gaétan's perfect finger draws this cluster

Of gasoline azaleas. Remember that each

One represents with choppy surfaces, men

Bent in upon his inviting smile. He curls

His mouth easily around such a young man's

Weekend of amyl or butyl. He didn't feel like

One of four thousand streaming to the party,

Saturated. Gaétan's ass, he is back again,

With the spray of untold others, the balance

Of the starry Milky Way expressed as circles

Of Crisco. His two nipples, four hands. That's

Right. His chest was his headshot. The hairs,

Black swoops of unfocused cloud: a thing

Indecipherable and zipping up slowly.

He's someone in this place, a gay orgy coming

In our new language Gaétan's a fine blonde.

He's someone in this place, a gay orgy coming

Back for its seconds. His meat between

My ribs and my hips, he intricately wrests me

Of my vacancy. My asshole's a black-fronted

Bar or a bookstore sinking, now engorged.

Immersed so proudly, I search for spectators.

Who has experience? In this theater, like all

Others, I play the drama of me continuously.

The introduction of characters, interactivity,

All night encounters, climax, and separation.

My Gaétan shimmers all such discrepancies,

Saying, over the steam and the ruin, If

It's sung at breakneck speed, it's up to you.

When I first saw Gaétan over vodka martinis,

When I first saw Gaétan over vodka martinis,

That day was more like yesterday, closing.

For him I'm an alcoholic back to the bottle

Of testimony, the need to swallow the dark.

And he was still jerking off into a blue blouse

Fragment. Strange stories like that — a bowl

Of penicillin and rubbing parts, his golden

Room, an enormous cavern filled with zeroes.

Its salt and its ooze, I tasted him. Dreadfully

Handsome, he blocks the image. His milk

Thinning down now. Feel me lapping there.

Hi. Hello. There, hello again. Drink me up.

We fall in love, exposing a light gold neck.

You see that test? It simply does not exist.

It takes only a touch from me, and I start

It takes only a touch from me, and I start

To go, directly up. See? All of us doing

The Boeing 747 in full

Bloom: a vibrant antagonism in the sky.

I get to watch them. The choreography

Of tight legs and jobs and uniforms

Tugging at my breath. Gaétan offers

Up his photograph, a signature cocktail

And laughs. He's everything I can imagine

As a gay male flight attendant. We float

Simply and fuck, but he's not fully air.

As he felt the poppers surge a French-

Canadian airline through him, through

Cameras he smiles down into me. Click.

Deeply tanned, the pig renews himself in sweat

Deeply tanned, the pig renews himself in sweat

And elbow grease, the spent cum of May.

My throat leaps for him from Sydney to Berlin.

Traveling worlds I'm sure I romanticize

The bunks tucked down with buds, an afternoon

Pissing behind me, their dicks upon my face.

I breathe it all in, pulling down a huge hit.

The body drained of its blow job, the erosion

Of slow, raw muscle splits from out of me.

I gawk, unmoored above my life. It's a long-

Raging high and fuck and shit. While burning

I was like Castro Street, groaning my brains

Out on a weekend, assed in minutes. Come

& get me friends. It's time to fuck the parade.

From his seminar chambers, Gaétan

From his seminar chambers, Gaétan

Returned in the autumn of 1983.

He knew the librarian who scribbled

Lice into the history a century later.

He made an eager report of us, skipping

Over the bullshit — the whips, leather

Hoods, and leashes, our hands asleep

On the floor. Notice how we're social

Venues full of heat. We don't add up,

Gaétan sneers, But we're still so happy.

Breathing and incomplete, we're light

With respect to the motion of the streets.

Danger, it might possess you. It's fantastic,

That we are only just a hint of ourselves.

Luscious, you are yearning, and you will be

Luscious, you are yearning, and you will be

Mine. My Gaétan, used in brief moments,

You're a swimmer, naked in the love-plums

And melons of arousal, churning, divining

The strange delights that make me faint

From exultation. You let each breath blow

Forward to tell the story. The day, a wet rose,

Uncut and hung by the beach. I can be

Penetrated, inducing awe. I can be gilded

By beauty and, thus, short-circuiting pain.

Overjoyed on my hands and knees, a garden,

A slut, a revolution burns against the crown.

Turn over, and keep turning. For my kiss,

I promise to tell of thee like flesh forever.

Pour me that bottom kid from the 1980s

Everyone to the fuck scene! Disco beneath

The bar, the soundtrack's heinous breath.

Pour me that bottom kid from the 1980s

With a dick as big as Finland. Bend over

Beers and a little more of me downstairs.

Another one on the house. Gaétan wants it

Raw. Me: I'll take his dick, hips, and torso

Long, then luscious. Gaétan told me so

I've come on in. Buzzed down to the floors

It makes me want boots, a smug little smirk

For weeks. His innards hanging out of mine.

I disco, of course, and I get frisky over here.

Just some teeth biting the very taint of him.

Just my appetite to dazzle the door astray.



Our investigator of about thirty years

Our investigator of about thirty years

Of age, medium build, was immediately

Certain of his new flannel suit and charm.

The film was an old maze, an illicit series

Of canvasses, when Gaétan asks, Aren't you

From New York?, and sits down too close,

His knee now knocking into yours openly.

He works the thighs at an unbuckled center.

Our investigator's momentous zipper

Was manipulated to give him a blowjob

In English, German, Spanish, and Russian.

The film. The cop. Gaétan was going wild.

Our investigator flickers there, glowing

With pubic hair and grabbing at heaven.

Our investigator entered Nob Hill's embrace,

Our investigator entered Nob Hill's embrace,

The feeling of three men sitting on a tipping

Point. Gaétan then raised his hands on mine

At about 11:45pm.

Our investigator began to unfold the balcony.

It was Gaétan's kiss that illuminated him

In the lips, lit him off the floor and fucked.

It was he who fell for another minor argument.

Then, through a skylight, two men were poured

With two orgasms, his two arms outstretched

Before each thrust, you tell me such stories.

The sweetest hearts, ready ears. Please know

I'll finish the matter. I'm out here mingling

The sound so you might escape from me.

But they did want to fuck, to look laid

But they did want to fuck, to look laid

On divans of body pouring onward,

To hear you're the first for his next cock.

The Hispanic male was down his throat,

No gulping, no hallway for resting against

The wall, no slurping, no gagging, nothing.

The neoliberal discourse: to be more

Responsible in his mouth full of gyzym.

At no time was there physical contact

Of any kind. We were safe in that room.

Oh, there was booze everywhere, drugs

Everywhere speaking of sex. He pulls

Down his jockeys like a window screen.

Oh, to be locked from the inside out.

## Guide

Figure 11 shows cigarettes, tumultuous  
Vistas, a world blacking out. The chest,  
The board of directors physically fighting  
To take him in. Their treatment is dizzying.  
So I was running away, but not from him.  
The contaminated air and waters mixed  
The violence into lesions, lesions always  
Defiantly staring back at us having such  
A good time. Another man concealed  
Behind sunglasses, blinking fiasco,  
He's all made up of his soft stomach,  
Painted lips, those darling calves. Guide  
Me around his scars, a borderline open  
At his chest of theaters, baths, and bars.

We want to be alive, or at least intactness

We want to be alive, or at least intactness

To be counted with the singular and strong:

If not as sweat and blood, then as flesh

Curvaceous and succulent to the name.

The mane of piss he shakes from his head.

The urinals will have their June of music.

I could mine its lips broken, a life of meeting

Creatures who cluster in their door. Queens

Pitch warnings, Honey, watch that entrance.

He's up to no good. With his colorful contact,

Those eyes strike me up in a conversation.

Gaétan has had his orgy in me. I know it.

No, on either side, no. There's no treatment

For his fading light. But the machine felt fine.

I remember, in the back alley zest of us,

I remember, in the back alley zest of us,

This whole emphasis on thunder. It was

5:30. I had arrived early that night

To share a joint, some sex and gossip says,

He's on angel dust. We had been doing that

Several nights a week, meeting a lot of—

You know—hairdressers. They wanted sex.

They were crazy. A monster once pounded

Them into a wall, a room packed with men.

A hundred rooms weeping fire. Inhibitions

Set aside, a flame gets used to its freedom.

Let me grab it? I too am chasing paper

Towels out here with living and the loving,

Heat searing. I reach in. Let me have it.

One was a hunter. Another two or three

One was a hunter. Another two or three

For treatment, go up five flights of stairs.

Go to it, getting. Go under moments. Go.

Now. Go back to your room, with feelings

Of joy. Go in jeans and a torn-up shirt.

With grey hair and a walrus mustache,

Go and knit them to use. Go overboard,

Adding a dry sauna and bad weather,

The scene worthy of Brueghel. Go to it,

In every cell, leave him little novelties.

Go up to admire his slicked-back hair,

And try to leave him quietly unspoken.

Go up to him and flirt and be gorgeous.

Leave him to tell the tale. Save the sun.

Like, I can come man. I mean I love it

Like, I can come man. I mean I love it

In the aisle, facing down everything:

Those sensual breezes delight my hips,

The far-off sounds of subway stations,

The river of ecstasy, where I crouch

Into unprotected raids of knee-length

White. I am this group scene, see,

Of throbbing balconies and meat racks.

They slip back into fornicating again like

Long-lost brothers, our piled-up clothes.

Rippling and huge, cathedral-like in parts,

My life is so very steamy and necessary.

Yes, I stared at the position of the stars.

And, yes, I endure there. Ain't that a trip?



Making my life lonely. I ordered it a beer.

It was his lumberjack shirt closed into a look.

His mustache resolved that way. It gestured

To me, it's possible to live here, you know.

This fist is full of people. This throat was dry,

So I went back and sat down, my pants a bar

With no windows or doors. It was dawning

A new age of sex and rock and roll and me.

It needed some air, another distant shore.

I held its breath, roughly. I went on to watch

These pieces inside of him. He's younger

Than I am, smaller, more obedient. The facts,

A limp little quantity, it came into my grave,

(I'll call it ecstasy, just another trip to the bar)

Making my life lonely. I ordered it a beer.

Gone broke with codes, I'm not going out

Gone broke with codes, I'm not going out

Today where war is awake — a technicolor

Movie of pliant loins sucked a moment

Then blown into bits. So tart for a mouth,

These men, they might be conspiracies

Set off with a pathological magnetism

From which will I ever be recoiled, warts

And all? It is trying to make use of us,

Its face lubricated with red and white,

Unblinking and blue, our nation gleams

Like it has never really thought of life.

Such an impersonal art hung like mules

Are hung. Pictures clash so heavily over

Our skin, but still I linger here, uncertain.

Let me not be voices flying in the air:

Let me not be voices flying in the air.

Fierce, bright, and all in, ram it up there.

Let me sword the sharp sounds, plummet

Deep into hauntings. For another broken

Shade, the garden wilds. Pleasure moves

Into me, get here, closer. Take to the bed

With the abruptness of deities. Falsify.

Create a crockpot that's tasty to the lips.

Dream you're in yourself without respect-

Ability. Gaétan, the door is your hand.

A ghost unbuttoned at the collar. O fuck,

Rumors come unbuttoned, social like lice.

Foraged, fucked, I'm a ghost still beginning,

Any beginning. Don't let me go so easily.

folded / Away

Slipped past as postscripts, Gaétan's folded  
Away with the napkins, kept wet with poison.  
He's gone dirty with Saint's disease. Shaking  
Vaguely, I keep throbbing my star for him.  
I can catch my own death in North America,  
Out rubbing the snow with all of my loves.  
The powder, I've tasted its gender, diagnosis,  
Economic status, or race. It's my face.  
My shoulder all roomy, emptied out for  
This history, though I've never even seen it.  
Our scar is so crowded, dulled into vagrants  
And criminals. I want them all and I weep.  
The heralds and troubadours, they fly so high.  
Yes, I dropped semen, but they proved it.

Gaétan, you can make us into anything.

Gaétan, you can make us into anything.

San Francisco's homosexuals turned into

Supermarkets or parking lots. They're up

All night, waiting to be defiled, wedging

Sections of dismantled trucks into an ass,

Like canaries in a mine. Gaétan's knotted now

Thirty feet above us, translucent with sperm.

Gaétan can make a bell of this knowledge.

Are you listening? He makes an attempt,

But the connection misses and falls flat.

Gaétan then swings out for larger doses

Of my little stomach-down heart. It beats

Between me and cytomegalovirus. I roam

Around in this feathering steam, stunning.

Like leftovers in the fridge, find a way

Like leftovers in the fridge, find a way

To whisper to me. To smile and enchant,

My way was to give that charity a fuck.

I move to the side and cling to questions.

I acquiesce. I bend my knees to help

Zero in. Zero tingling down into my toes

And scalp. We pass it back and forth,

A singing act performed in an absolute

Silence. A nice blonde for the afternoon,

Gaétan spread his legs more and more.

I probed the meat with my fingers. I saw

What's in each booth. Bravely, my darling

You say, I'm going to get less splendid.

I'm going to die in the very home I'm in.

Being sexual was what became of ourselves.

Tricking myself through everything in part

Being sexual was what became of ourselves.

Everything was aimed at sex. Our boyfriends

And our girlfriends, they hugged us whether

We were short, thick, and thin. The jerk

Of our hearts pumping sodomy, the rigid

Emotions we were allowed. (My personal

Feeling is one such gate.) We didn't want to

Be straight, but we didn't have more space.

There was no book on what we were doing.

We took care of ourselves. All ages, all

Origins of sex were lost in unabashed lines

Of kissing and forgetting Gaétan in circles.

But there he was, electrically. We are older.

This new thrill that lasts your breath away

The dance floor bobbed around Gaétan,

This new thrill that lasts your breath away.

We called him to forests of perfect arms,

Jungles of sperm-fire cracking so many

Poppers. Our war was opening endlessly.

We go off to sling the room with the screams

Of animals — grunts and growls that turn

Inward, baths and corridors of long red nails.

The old ways, they did fade with the twilight.

My door now hugs slightly around someone

Else. I get my divorce. I buy my apartment.

Let me bury my dead to get on with it.

Goodbye: a maiming pool packed with naked

Bodies. Basically, people just stroll through.



Tell me the man. Tell me the bare sprinkling

Tell me the man. Tell me the bare sprinkling

Of people. Patients under a quarantine,

A couple of guys call to me, Come here.

Tell me, thrashing a little. Rimming water,

Tell me I left that notebook on floors

Of restrooms and park benches sweetly.

We calculated odds. We figured chance

Did not approach zero. We were zero.

Like a pinwheel blown past any shame,

Tell me about the biggest slut that ever

Was such a large trend. You make me

Appear, then splay my body wildly,

A shield that fails to seal you. Tell me

They don't see it, how far up this goes.

Out on a whim, and I cease to be terrified.

Doctors delivered him the guise of beauty,  
And we went wrestling at it. My brain leaps

Out on a whim, and I cease to be terrified.

Activity stood at the center of the graph.

It was my duty to make him feel made,  
To be himself, the man who lost his future.

Now we are outside that particular life  
Of drugs supplied, white flowers crackling.

I can't let it go. I can hold it all it seems

I do like them and all and you, you keep

It breezy, but we're not all a lucky thing.

I begin to masturbate these letters. Try to

Catch all the gnats in somebody else's room,

To kiss them tightly. I couldn't. But I want to.

Time loops back to be parts of bridges.

Time loops back to be parts of bridges.

To stare out, I went at the land, my nodes

Like horses. The hours are sick, I said. At ice

Melting fast, I shouted, Take it down in me,

Go ahead. Take me three hundred at a time.

This crystal fatigue and culpability, quick

Suck them from my broken snout, shred me

A little apart and leave. You can cast me

Forward into an exhausted person, an arid

Desert might bloom. It feels good, very

Sane, to have it raked across my ass, Gaétan,

To be blown off the page. Breathe deep

Boy, each passage tries to hold you in place,

Greedily. A beacon, pretty much just like me.

Absorbing the obvious things like beauty

Gaétan snatched me up, my dick like

Diamonds. Then I harnessed him completely,

Absorbing the obvious things like beauty

And strife. His voluptuous white teeth

Have gone supple. I keep paying for this

Fortnight of tokens to show me his face,

Those two dots above his name: the way

You can always call me him. Like certainty,

I wanted Gaétan to see me scientifically,

To examine me through this greasy lens,

I keep paying for it. I seem to listen.

Just listen as I shower him off with time.

I can't remove cruelty. I take what kind

Of test I can with him in yellowing ice.

Throughout my body, I wept and wept

To unfold that indescribable male

Throughout my body, I wept and wept.

A depression that's difficult to read,

I wiped him off me. I wore him down.

My geography in sync with his porn,

I drench myself in gallons, buckets

Of queers. Clean-shaven ghosts enter

The premises, playing pool and dice.

The hot water, it continues to splash

That version of history. The tales told

To say anything, to talk again, together.

It's not over, and I am so very happy.

Please, another picture, one more film:

A man I am no boy, no zero, no pill.

I go red throughout me day here came ripe

Someone come watch me smile like this wet

Floor with bottles broken my delightful free-

For-all inside his mouth all it ever needs

Is lube and I'll understand it spraying boots

Me and I've blown a few loads longing

For creatures seeping down drops to filth

I go red throughout my day here came ripe

And ready (never cleaned) the cum spit out

Fingering off a pitch dark leather guy fucked

When I drop my throat inside them moaning

Loads come blurry and feverish thickly thighs

Gnarled into what we're meant to be here

A part of that breathtaking change of scene

And more piss stained stroking imagine it

And may we all be desired. I was.

Another machine that lingers outside  
Your door, another occupant who opens  
One way and then another. It's alright.  
Everyone just reach in and take some.  
I'm his ass engaged in seed, mouth fallen  
Slack. All of my beautiful lovers wrapped  
Up in tape and black leather, flesh flushed  
While fucking my partner, his face inches  
Away. Gaétan looks so woundedly, asks  
Why are you interested in these people?  
Nudging keys at me, straddles me. A kiss  
Is no answer, but a wilderness of hearts  
And fears. What else can I say? A record  
Of real beauty lives in that house on fire.

GHOSTS



I.

I arrived in the redwoods the mist hung thick.  
And rustle of wings in its razor-sharp roots.  
A deer leaped from out of the silver distance.  
The river flowing and plunging down into dark.  
The chilly autumn air stirring the river gently.  
I could make out the steelheads under surfaces.  
Rumors of roots in the thickening underbrush.  
A mouse in its fahrenheit clearing the field.  
The late light upon the mist began to blossom.  
Of the starry Milky Way expressed as circles.  
Rolling into green banks of fading and fallen.  
Sways the thick canopy of fir over my head.  
And the chalky white edge of the river's bank.  
I made it to the meandering river of redwoods.

II.

The stand of redwoods shivering triumphant.

The grove life as inches of rainfall per year.

I was there folding its leaves after sunlight.

Douglas fir and leaf maple and bracken fern.

Mixture of trees turns bright yellow and orange.

Bloom a vibrant antagonism in the sky.

The lumberjack's ax or a petaled violet flower.

Tiny seeds or lack of moisture the moonlight.

Temperatures drop emotionally into acorns.

Cover the forest floor very fragile with laurel.

The ants commingling roots to make baskets.

During the nineteenth century some of this.

As fallen logs and cones of each species.

A couple of guys call out to me come here.

III.

Fog streamed over the magnificent canopy.

I breathe it all in pulling down a big hit.

Redwood trillium with a liquor license party.

It takes only a touch from me and I start.

Flickering wet beats to insects and fungi.

Crammed in with abundance bare-chested.

Evening redwood resin pouring in groves.

Pulsating fairy rings trendy new branches.

In the musical pattern of dainty pink disco.

The bar the soundtrack's heinous breath.

Food and medicine growing hunkiest hazel.

Thrives in clubs felt more like huge trees.

I saw it tea dancing across the green carpet.

Big cocaine and quaaludes bright blossoms.

IV.

Those eyes strike me up in a conversation.  
The moist conditions of himself pulsing out.  
His whole body stems lost whirling in air.  
I disco of course and I get frisky over here.  
He works the thighs at an unbuckled center.  
The synthesized rhythms hips in the autumn.  
The music had started in his calloused hands.  
Nestled my brain was something so animal.  
The thump-thump-thumping of naked forms.  
All night encounters climax and separation.  
I felt silenced by the climate's condensation.  
Sword fern's beautiful and fire-resistant spike.  
I went in to the cottage and grabbed himself.  
Blushed my loafers sailing through window.

V.

Pulling myself roughly he reached into me.

As if I were his thighs zipping himself up.

With pubic hair and grabbing at heaven.

His forearm glistening me into the sling.

I hung in unison with his brutish behavior.

He laughed myself hanging from the hook.

His mustache resolved that way it gestured.

It makes me want boots a smug little smirk.

Raw me I'll take his dick hips and torso.

Yank between me pinning me to joyfulness.

The vegetable shortening from the duffel bag.

A deep huff of his hand dipping and flexed.

Just listen as I shower him off with time.

So small so vulnerable right under my nose.

VI.

So small so vulnerable right under his nose.  
Just listen as he showers me off with time.  
A deep huff of my hand dipping and flexed.  
The vegetable shortening from the duffel bag.  
Yank between him pinning him to joyfulness.  
Raw him he'll take my dick hips and torso.  
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I laughed himself hanging from the hook.  
He hung in unison with my brutish behavior.  
My forearm glistening him into the sling.  
With pubic hair and grabbing at heaven.  
As if he were my thighs zipping myself up.  
Pulling himself roughly I reached into him.

VII.

He tore off his shirt pools magenta scars.  
With no windows or doors it was dawning.  
Down his neck his throat heard wheezing.  
He's all made up of his soft stomach.  
Toward the water the ugly purple blotches.  
Its salt and ooze I tasted him dreadfully.  
They walked in a series of dark black spots.  
Plunging the deep indigo of two mouths.  
The handsome chin disfigured flushing.  
Throughout my body I wept and wept.  
In the brown dirt among the white gravel.  
Vaguely I kept throbbing my star for him.  
Collecting his breath and trying to scream.  
For creatures seeping down drops to filth.





IX.

Limping a little            to reach the banks.

How frail our ship            Spill

Overjoyed

The river            passing purple flowers.

   the ship sailed on.

A small purple spot

   a wet rose

                         a little more of me

In the low waters of the river

His body broad and sparse

   on mine.

Scattered stubble

   gathering a blue of bliss.

X.

He rivered

spilling breath

Wind weather

into bits

was splashing

swept away

in waves

defecating kohl

bruises softening

a delphinium

scattered into

Kisses and

the water

the peony

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