Special Thanks to...

Nate Chinen for his help with layout and design, without which COMBO would still be thirty-two poems in a manilla envelope; to Kerry Sherin, John Parker, Kristen Gallagher and my wife, Susanna, for all their helpful suggestions; to Louis Cabri for allowing me to reprint material from Philly Talks; and to Al Filreis, Greg Djanikian, Bob Perelman and everyone at the Kelly Writers House for all their encouragement and support.

JESSICA CHIU

indicator

a word wiggled out from my dry mouth wanted a little juiciness, in covert drew a gun. hide best behind what is dense clear and beautiful. exploded in mine, what is said.

clear and beautiful.

this shaking

the house creaks and so do i in this restlessness of movement. I say nothing.

when did the day change clothing, i do to avoid suspicion. we are friends, correct?

nothing in particular, we cd be of two places i am of two minds. no excuses, excuse me. you

nothing in particular, we cd be of two places i am of two minds. no excuses, excuse me. you

look to one side, show me edge of pennsylvania, a numerous field of flowers and murderous stalks in wheat. this payment

nothing. to barter me, a good item is a watch with two hands, remember to still them, mine will never stop.
you cd say

is it my fault? yr
inflamed eye, we want
bigger words, yr meaning is unclear. clarify today: be-
cause the birds were synchronized
over my head, and that meant some-
thing. to me. to me to
me, and a woman who desires
smaller waists and modesty.

At the Khyber Pass Pub

Though the paint is red
(the stage as a photograph), you
imprinted against what is
ephemeral. Marianne and those
tenuous lines, because her room
is kept at the museum: one last stab to

last, this conversation. Do
you hear me? This is a room
and comes undone from

where I'm sitting.

Poem

That is not a sliver
of moon, I know the rest
is shadowed, lines
in my mind and who
is more corrupted?

CHRIS STROFFOLINO

Two Poems

Monday Nite Garbage

1.

The things you want to hear have been talking
to the things you don't want to hear for some time,
but I've been known to say stomach and mean belly,
brain when (those who say 'mind' when they mean
'soul' say) I mean mind. So, it's okay, don't rush it.
The climbers above have no paper on you
(because paper has no paper on you).

And what's beyond argument, the owl valued wise
in the lyric west because it can't see in the daylight,
pulls the plug on the not-to-be-forgotten fool
that pulls the rug out from under you.
Hatred comes in the guise of the victim to whom
hatred comes, as if you have no soul but situations
against which, allegedly in order to live, you dig
a shelter in which there's no room for error
because there's no holes for air.

The meat of the argument was you had to
be a vegetable to be a vegetarian.
We all pale before photosynthesis.
Existence does our dirty work.
You were better at history than at math
but history makers are often better at math.
You fidget for fudged gravity, getting
cold feet on "This Is Your Life" unless
it's in black and white for the sake of
those who need competition to excel,
the kind of painting you're afraid of
falling in love with at first sight.

2.

I jump from the train of skepticism
(disguised as symbolism) for the feeling
of jumping. Not that a warmer fate is more
in touch with the simple folk. I started
to stray early. What did you expect?
Awakening from fervor?

Sure, madness is the madam in the whorehouse of the soul but any love divorced from duty will remain unrequited unless the desire for something not obligatory may rise as uninhibitedly as in the daze of old. Maybe even more so because of the increased running-jump it needs to burst through the victory tape of self-consciousness.

"I'd trade my soul in for the world if that were not jumping from the frying pan into the fire." But as long as some things ugly on the outside are ugly on the inside some pleasing on the outside can be pleasing on the in, though most ins end up on the outs and awareness that one doesn't notice the scenery enough isn't enough to make you look at it more unless there's such an animal as a guilty glance, as has been rumored in these parts by someone who demands difficulty so much it's often the last to come and the first to leave the parties it sees as waiting rooms, someone who dropped out of politics but only for political reasons.

If there's worse things than feeling pulled from the audience on "Let's Make A Deal" surely there's better things than it and "you're not in the gutter if you don't care you're in the gutter" may save the day once again for those who have their cake & so live to eat on a denotative level but connotations bubble beneath (if you have to take it too hard to take it to heart).

The painted weathermap began to chip revealing the weather, and we're not even embracing. Next you you know we were too busy loving the day for its body to hear the calls of jealous mind this, in all probability, is.

The Firehouse of Handy Perplexities

Ethel buys a dog and this proves the existence of God as Dr. Zizmor gently laquers your skin with a Fruit wash, followed by a gentle application of the fruit acid you might as well call the soul at least as long as you're on the train that seems empty because desire isn't hot enough to melt the stony gazes of others or discover the eagerness surely there after bathing in endorphins or Scotch. The pills I took were intuition; the vitamins imitation. They were one without victory. I hate victory. They were one while the work went on and slept over, snoring loud enough to keep the neighbors up but since they were all out in the town that was out of its mind job there was no danger of repercussions or echoes unless you could snore so loud you woke yourself up and we never knew why we woke before the alarm asked us to and imagined some unofficial outside, some god that bore more of a resemblance to a slipper left on the staircase than to your corporate head of money washed for salads one would choke on unless the main course was no horse but that which you must change in mainstream which becomes steam in the heat of a curse, in the stomach digesting kingdoms and spitting out cars that skate on the steam and kiss us goodbye to buy a hug we could work out of the system once the race is finished and purchased like trash that can be worshipped in hammocks at work.
borders

boundaries not your own. A woman has been out on the corner all day shaking her finger at a problem. Birth control in China you profess it all a government plot. A young boy without his skateboard because he has that haircut walks towards me sitting on the stoop doesn’t normally make eye contact but I catch him intensely and he almost stops. What is wrong and you say poverty and also smoking drinking meat coffee chocolate marijuana and the attitudes of certain musicians. A square shape in Africa still trying to live together. walks by smoking and I think I used to think sign of weakness but now seems the stark give up of unavoidable stress. Whose will surrender what man once along long lines slashed all across the earth. Patience dream don’t cry serbo-usa pass sour and where is Croatia. Her ouija-medical card changes colors. ran over that boy with a tank on television. Driving alone to work everyone in their windows up tuned to a different radio each exhaust pipe flowing corroded recorder. as the flames rose to her roman nose and her hearing aid started to melt. You say don’t say that focus on. In China where the main form of transportation is the bicycle. Whose event supported by how money after what. A woman walking beaming down the street baby swaddling papoose on her chest got any money honey. No. What now has none.

Dreamwork

I dreamt today what really happened. Installing a clock some time ago manifested. Investments in paper in work in memory, the compiler draws his mix and readies. A wish a footnote a place for stocking. Coming into the hand that gathers. Hence prediction’s bold gesturing. On the other hand, expenditure, of commonplace, of the outworn. Endless markings on endless sheets, extracts of accidents confidently make history.
Few Were Shocked

The authorities warn us random gestures are dangerous.
Money divides and makes things live, though
some of us are already alive in the wake
of our own apocalypses. The elements wreck
each transitional moment nothing hovers above, and
I saw the military adjust, move into position.
A girl you never dated, growing up in a country
where random sounds resemble rifles cracking, the air water.
Where random sounds resemble rifles, cracking the air, water,
a girl you never dated: growing up in a country
I saw the military adjust. Move into position
each transitional moment. Nothing hovers above. And
of our own apocalypses? The elements-wreck
some of us are already alive in. The wake
money divides and makes. Things live though
the authorities warn us. Random gestures are dangerous.

Passing Through

In memory of “passer” in Cassell’s New French Dictionary

To pass, to go, to disappear and pass away,
to die, fade, or to become.
That has become a proverb.
That has slipped my memory.
That flower is faded.

To carry over, to usher in...
to while away (time).
To cure an illness
he has gone through severe trials.
He has passed through the town.
We must submit, it must be endured:
we must put up with it
He forgives him nothing.
Some day or other he will fall into my hands.
He is just dead.
I will call on you tomorrow.
I have no desire for it now.
My best days are over.

Come this way, go about your business.

Andrew Epstein

Three Poems

Nothing But Time and a Word

“But deliberate invention is hard to sustain,” he quips.
Just in time, a bus arrives brimming with new questions.
Generations shall lay waste paper here, the poor facts.
We cling to the rose sunset before the dashboard’s
black ending. What a man could do with this
terrain, having nothing but time and a word.
The farmer poses, the cows all fake and distant,
pastoral dead, the city king at last in built brick robes
Pastoral, dead the city king. At last, in built brick robes,
the farmer poses the cows. All fake and distant
terrain, having nothing but time and a word.
Black ending: what a man could do! With this
we cling to the rose sunset, before the dashboard’s
generations shall. Lay waste, paper here the poor facts
just in time. A bus arrives brimming with new questions,
but deliberate invention is hard. To sustain, he quips.

there sits the
fact
secret excrete
history diva smells
small treasures
from wasting
as it mattered
relocution
of involuntary
effects raining
ringing in the veins
this organs
capacity withers
enjoy

Andrew Epstein

Three Poems

Nothing But Time and a Word

“But deliberate invention is hard to sustain,” he quips.
Just in time, a bus arrives brimming with new questions.
Generations shall lay waste paper here, the poor facts.
We cling to the rose sunset before the dashboard’s
black ending. What a man could do with this
terrain, having nothing but time and a word.
The farmer poses, the cows all fake and distant,
pastoral dead, the city king at last in built brick robes
Pastoral, dead the city king. At last, in built brick robes,
the farmer poses the cows. All fake and distant
terrain, having nothing but time and a word.
Black ending: what a man could do! With this
we cling to the rose sunset, before the dashboard’s
generations shall. Lay waste, paper here the poor facts
just in time. A bus arrives brimming with new questions,
but deliberate invention is hard. To sustain, he quips.
Let us change the subject.
I can’t make it out, it
is beyond my comprehension.
To pass sentence
on oneself, to swim
across the river.
To shoot a soldier. Pass over
that place. Pass me
that article.
Go your way.

To decay, to fall off, to happen.
He cannot do without wine.
Strange things are going on.
I must inform him of
everything that happens -
the opportunity is slipping away.

**JENA OSMAN**

from “The Periodic Table as
Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist”

*Laq (I lag) Series*

The northerly strip comprises a family of remarkably similar metals known as
the rare earths or, more formally, the lanthanides... The lanthanides are so
similar to one another that until recently they could be separated only with great
difficulty. Indeed, the near uniformity of their features suggests that it is not
really worth making the considerable effort to separate them. Nature has
seemingly no use for the lanthanides in its contriving of life, and humanity has
only recently found certain sporadic uses for these regions.

- P.W. Atkins, Periodic Kingdom

---

Ceres in prison
found on the beaches and river sands
as in a honeycomb
the inner level
and various organelles
small, humble abode
likely to ignite
if scratched with a knife
green twin inquisitor
isolated a new earth
a snoop
gave salts of different colors
a lever, a crow bar
a cigarette lighter
carbon arc in a welder’s eye
pry a welder’s eye
neo-twin agrees quickly
extracted from a rose
fractionation of sleep
sways, droops, flowers in the wind
lapse of light flint
to express and summon
silvery double

Prometheus stole fire
the jack of clubs and highest trump
workers at Ohio State confirmed it
abbreviated treatise
completely missing from the earth’s crust
partisan writer
captures light in pale blue or greenish glow
little yet known
silvery luster stable in air
adding numbers in long half-lives
used to dope crystal, the central idea
the gist of lasers
excited in the infrared
condensed coercive forms
ignite in air

Europe is a deposit on the walls
identified in the sun and certain stars
countries of doped plastic and color tv
abducted to Crete in the form of a bull

fast burnout rate for son of Jacob
roams and roves as alpha form
this film which spills off
with a spike in dry air
body-centered, close-packed
wandering garnets

the coal car left the mine
with grams of rare earth
in a tantalum crucible
dark as the moon
wider than it was deep
the masses lapped against the sides
"handle with care"
or the vessel will break
or the phosphor will fall

impacting color
hard to get at
readily attacked
dissolved
evolved
with hydrogen
calcium
color imparted
neutron bombardment

hot Stockholm
burning chemists
announced the existence of "element X"

few uses for the acute toxic
fiery radioactive higher than normal
violent raging recently stolen
hot and bothered hot to trot
hot under the collar
hot making it hot for
unusual magnetic properties
only a few uses have been found for

in 1860, terbia was known as erbia
after 1877, erbia became terbia

the usage panel was split on the matter
56% preferred ur
in the potassium vapor
violation of pronunciation
and ion-exchange
deflates the moral standard
isolated sin in enamel glaze
time was the earliest name for Scandinavia
was discovered in 1879
was the least abundant of the rare earth elements
only a few years ago, time was not obtainable
at any cost
time was silver-gray, soft, malleable
and could be cut with a knife
now a bomb, a capsule, a card
a clock and a deposit

hooligan, face-centered
keep it in a closed container
throw the word backwards
so the ruffian reacts slowly with water
electrical resistance increases ten-fold
when it becomes a boy
a destructive youth spelled backwards

a catalyst in cracking
sailing closer into the wind
to steer Paris
closer into the wind
sails flapping
most costly
sails

Acid (I) Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the</th>
<th>past</th>
<th>use</th>
<th>nap</th>
<th>put</th>
<th>amo</th>
<th>cam</th>
<th>balk</th>
<th>cafe</th>
<th>east</th>
<th>film</th>
<th>mad</th>
<th>not</th>
<th>hear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| [the past upends neptune
pulls army camera books
cf. estates from mad northern hear]
MICHAEL MAGEE

Three Poems

A Detroit of the Mind

Will thinking get me anywhere?
To Detroit, possibly.

-Robert Creeley

I thought all night
along I 90
until my back of my
mind was killing me

think yourself
to Detroit never having
seen it, or a map
Michigan is a glove, a mitten

if you want
the history of Detroit go
find out for yourself
they all said. The history

of a stitch in a
mitten? It got
knit, now
on my hand on the wheel

$5 jobs and a
not-so-great-migration
a Ford to get lost
the Right to Assembly

Armenians? Why here? Or,
not here, not being
anywhere near there
necessarily w/ no map

90 heads for the lakes
yes it does
lions and tigers, oh my
yes oh yes it does

Sir, excuse
me my rock chest hurts
like a buffalo
cleaving the land

to lead on
w/ out eerie detour
right? An FM
radio but no cassette

marvelous for the
postman, no mountains
to tempt him, or
his girl. The lake, some woods

who drives a Caddy?
just fill it w/
regular, Antoine. No one
'I'll tell me straight

they say these should
be 6's but
the letter said
17 something. Left on

the counter w/ the
extra keys. Please
have mercy, I'm burning
up. Beautiful island

fever mirage. It
wanes like flight, breaks
and you're wet, hastings away
this ain't my cleaver, man

it's my dad's. I left
his ass back in
Cleveland, England, wherever
that is. On the

outer side looking in
but me too, my
chagrin. Dear
Melvin, I've written
you & Dale 75 times
do you think I was born
yesterday? don't have to be
Woodward & Bernstein to know you've
decided entirely too
readily on impulse to
leave me here
at the pay phone

look, I'll be
at 313-567-1170
forever, I'm living
here now

A Rhetoric of Examples # 7

Why had I been there? There were the trees then, and the many little trees, and
there were the several trees scattered about as well. I could remember thinking
deeperly of trees while looking up into the vast trees; such thoughts always lead me
back to those days among the trees when I would sit lazily on the limbs of trees
or half-gallop through the maze of trees, finally breaking out into a plot of trees.
Trees were all in those days! Now, as I hunched in the trees’ shade, I could not
help but be reminded of trees despite my sincere effort to put trees behind me,
and set out for the trees which awaited me, patiently, like a forest.

A Kind of Woman

her a man for night
t-shirt waist-high and rising
“gimme shelter” in drudgery
of three month watch-your-back

apprise a dense social irker
of guy eyeing wheelchair stealing
feet, bed and crib, try
gettin' by with less

chair to table, doctor's questionnaire
his physical story, any
kids? or kids or kids
a pony tale of chemicals

red died follicles down
to the routes, transdermal
or moans, a strong gene
against the (estro) grain

nice to endometrium you
tough actin prolactin, just kidneying
I epithelial for you
learning to liver with it

high pressure and depression
of recent mammaries
and mutation
cogulations, its a girl

waste-thigh and raising
phantom limbs, drop
balls and chain, could appall
fail pull or fill us

a womanhood
if a woman could
ribbing Adam, flesh of her
flesh and it was good

KATHERINE STEELE

Her Divinity

Hope is
rooted in
incompletion, he said.

Even the hand
seducing our great doktor,
could not hold. An image

contained
Erasable with movement -
her curves define language.
(In 1912, Pound held her in a museum corner.

Upon reading three lines he remark ed, fascinating, and signed her name and occupation.)

Sons turned lovers will father future movement.

His gospel is too dense for children. Love will feed.
Breast to tongue, you swallow,
words.
It hurts to birth splitting corners.

**Propaganda**

I do not have time to write on nothing in particular

So much need for hunger (to be fed?)

We are good at this game Forgetting is politics when practiced with precision Silver sparks of salt water wash our eyes

we dream the thoughts
normal in real time
in real time we take what we need

Politics is tacit and is loud
We are afraid

so for now - we do not understand

That car hates me no he hate me

as he scream out fag got

He is political in each breath

It is not from lack of energy
A word is political

A word in relation to you is love

Words are your enemy will digest you hold you to your wall Poetry is copulating

With the enemy
This denies me?

Say after me: I am detached from language
Say after me: I am afraid of words

Say after me: Who are you?
Say after me: (absentee)

Lies are political
Truth is political
Making love to you is political as fuck.

I can not trust a violent outburst

He drapes blood like a manto and washes me with water. I don’t belong is that leg splitting pain.

I can not trust (take the 5 ) a therapeutic claim.

Today, we are learning how to sharpen tongues.

Words spit and undo names.

**LOUIS CABRI**

*Two Poems*

from “For Alan Davies”

**Coin Opera**

Seek slim chance’s margin to write toward the don’t-know still repeal logic of punning difference will coincide on words still shame to leap no more & only speak in the renaissance market still going home to the iamb conserving this body as good as a coffin still driven from such givens minces with them still drafted to laughter a generation’s ills formed in a shell—with shells to pay still one elephant down the tubes at Hoover U is the big to-do still can’t Harvard carpet how come

no hat for the cat translates favourite rhyme still translated through unwritten memories brings oblique references this side of the lyric still I’d have hoped differently if there was something else to ask for still time to read about appalling hurt finds, alert, this, still.

**Water proof**

How about that, voice. How about that voice. How about that choice.

How about that bit. How about that, hoarse. How about that drink forgets it.

How about that quartz awhile replaced it. How about that quart. How about that habit dressed to spill now.

For instance how about that backyard time. And that body too eh. How about that comma rhyme.

**JOHN PARKER**

**The Sinful Flesh**

The scene on the inside looked even worse, absolutely horrific. Disbelief, then indignation purged him, then disgust. One’s posture accommodates the wheel the way a snake which lives by swallowing all things whole accommodates the bones. When Moses ascended to heaven, he found God sitting and crowning written letters. Militant and defensive, both men cast their eyes about them, taking account of each sharp object. He stands up, but
his spinal chord no longer straightens
all the way out. I was over by the barbershop, officer,
waiting on a bus.

But if the ministration of death,
written and engraved in stones, was glorious,
so that the Children of Israel could not steadfastly behold
the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance,
which glory was to be done away, how shall not
the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?

It wasn't your regular approach, he talked funnier than most.

Intestines hung in the scales
like kosher sausages. Some people really flip out,
al of a sudden they just snap and kaboom!
you better watch out. Turn right, stop,
watch the guard rail, squeeze through here, don't run the light, stop
when it tells you to stop. If only that didn't feel like work.

Thought I'd stop in for a corned beef,
but beforehand this longhair
comes up to me and says, Have you accepted Jesus?
Even the veterans paled and lost their confidence;
one rookie, his lunch. And I said well if he come
to fulfill the Law, then what? You have shown me Torah,
now show me its reward.

Master of all, for whom do you spend your time?
A man is destined to live many generations
from now, and his name is Akiva,
the son of Joseph. Crucified, dead
and buried. Someone robbed
the delicatessen, disemboweled
Mr. Rabinowitz, and shot Rivka who was likewise
dismembered.

Best not to stand next to men on the bus,
best not to touch. An elderly gentlemen
made it as far as the last step
before screaming at Leah, his wife,
recently deceased, O Jesus, you brought the money, right?
A man came and tried to take pictures,
realized he'd forgot the flash and cursed.
You think this was the act of an anti-Semite?
Twirling an enormous beard around a gnarled forefinger
the prophet met the man's gaze head on
and repeated the command. Be free

of all restrictions. Step backward.
For years and years and years she did everything for him.

He is destined to find in each crown the source
for thousands of laws. For God has done
what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not:
sending thus his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh
and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just
requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us,
who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

You hafta put it in the machine, mister, no, you can't
get on otherwise, yeah, right there, no, look. I ain't making change. Man
who you talkin to? Ever the vegetarian,
puking corn and beef bouillon,
he cried out, You bastard, this isn't soup, it's poison.
No one touched anything. Now see if he'd converted me
like he wanted, I would've been delayed just enough to have died,
maybe. As when the tracks begin to shudder
as the train approaches. You can't say when, precisely?
Where're the two women I saw? Anyone find them?

Show me the man. His voice made the candlelight
on the table cloth tremble
Soultrane, maybe, or Love Supreme. I see this, think
kinda like something you read
in books. Look in the walk-in refrigerator, I saw
that on the television once. If there were two for every one
of me, we'd call it a victory against meat.

Baby, you know the kinda kooks
I gotta put up with, some of them's dangerous
folks.

The water! The water wasted feeding your sacred
cattle. Come on over, we'll listen
to this new record together,

baby. He held the silver fork
so tightly his knuckles turned

white. Even sitting down them Nike bitches sure chew my feet up. Folks,
the scene is gruesome. The body holds sixteen pints
of blood, can lose four and still run.

Protein sources? Beans? Growing up I never went one week
not eating steak and look at me! Compared to you,
the very picture of health. Worst part is,
I'm as bad as any freak
among them, what with this spine
like a goddamn sidewinder. They say it feels just
like falling asleep. Well, it certainly didn't
smell as good
coming back up. Our small intestine,
coupled to the large, forms a sinuous and vast
pathway to ruin. Be silent.
Man cannot live by bread alone, by law or ceremony.
For so it appeared before me.

**LEE ANN BROWN**

Three Poems

**Valentines**

a wide-eyed leaning forward
chewing on the gristle
rolling our eyes
in the heart of the matter
glossy arches
liquid maps

we could use a place
like this in your neighborhood
Eat our vegetables
they'll do a gearbox good

Done details:
Memo
15 of 15
Valentines,
I kiss you
Six million times
plus one
raised to the max higher power
propertius anonymous
I won't give you away
don't put the light on
unless you absolutely have to

**Caitlyn Grace**

Seeing you today I
went to the totally lesbian
end of my spectrum
Ah, Lesbia-
Blonde straight hair
& laser intellect of love.

Love's social intellect
crosses over tumult through air
plane's drinks of pretending we know
where and how to live

**Suite Esmerelda**

Euripides' "hideout" cave is believed to have been found -
identified by a clay cup with his name on it. His play "Hippolytus" was
inspired by a stay in a cave on the island of Salamis and describes a
terrain similar to the island's. He based much of his work on the writings
of Gellius, a second-century Roman. -NY Times

This is the bed....

Based in Esmerelda
I forgo the Triple Bipac
tracked
to radiating spheres
of which I sing.
The single solitary singer
is not -
is not tuned into
one frequency only.
Tough jelly on the "El"
Skipping out to Hookerbocker
for the daily bread run
looks like she's
ready to jump
to the good music
for once
transcribe those bags
of drossy stuff
into
higher powered
crushed 
powder
What were those 
boys I was to
transform?
Almost remember
Please do
Character recognition
now!
(Something about 
transforming
everyday? (life)
into
poetry!?)
The potentials of Junky spring in a black notebook

Love lies sleeping under the grass
bed still green
purple tangle
green vetch
city garden

Hinge  Holding area ———

point on a vector
coughing
Red sorrel
draped in
pine
bough cut
to keep the purple arcs in
brambles
winter
garden
locked,
lights on
tousled
Beds

KERRY SHERIN

Song of the Moon

open mouth
full moon
month of Sundays
wait

until June
funny how I
yearns 4 you
alphabet gap
sonic glue

I refer—
I refer, too—
car pitched toward
light pitched to
full moon hanging
all the ings
of things
yesterday’s party

heart spill rings

stoplight. corner.
drive and home
and dawn.
musical notions

close. drawn.
businesses
not one alights.
curtain pulled
candescent sense
dawn will dawn
head light bloom
mounted moon!
drive faint blue

another bus —
the same the
third — another moon
another word

playing under
under song

Love Lyrics

#1
Caught in my throat like a bone
the thought
what was blood turns to rain
what was bone
to dust
old logic we shared
and I love dust
suddenly because it isn’t yours
I mean,
it doesn’t belong to you

#3
facing the old men’s backs
behind that awkward
indecisive man
to whom I sold my sex
for nothing I kept -
the passive ones
devoutly listen, sitting up -
I could do a backflip
from a handstand
I could clap like a laugh

Misconception

#5
your contrary
boring sameness
your endless
back and forth
is a metronomic
swinging
clock or cock—
your gift to me—
so this is eddy

1 damp fuse of lyric
unlit
on first visit into this
cracked dish
wish list that
fist could be
kissed or head or
feet
one cry could you
make new?
no you no eye
no sole of feet
no mouth no ache
no tooth no feat
resorts to grief
for loss of form or
formless-
ness or peeled veneer
— “bad batch of glue in 1986”
no tragedy
in flushed fishes candles
wickless quicksilver
flickers in the far
desire waves g’bye g’bye
take this vale of spilt
no one sees no use
crying over
the new already lost
dust asks dost thou thus
depart from us
traceless
BOB PERELMAN

Tenses

In the middle style, verb follows subject and they join forces to ally themselves with a given time and place.

Mistakes can be funny; there is a well-thumbed anthology of angles for walking into walls. Or be mistakes funny can not. God is beyond genre, sayeth genre, but genre remains faithful unto the day. To pronounce the death of any genre in the language the genre itself has provided is a self-impossibilitizing act by an apostle of an empty wind blowing backwards from a future that will never arrive.

In the middle style you use the poem to keep the present presentable or go to your room, amuse yourself, and assume the position.

Glints of unending focus. I was walking down Stenton Avenue in the middle style, past the Dollar Store where the clerk was shot and will be as long as the tenses ratify the cars, willed light, thin grey clouds stretching inappropriately east, losses spread evenly throughout the signs.

They're soaked with the present and this was wrong, crouching uniformly beneath the fireball of reason taking off and disappearing into the future.

There I was, pounding the spaceship wall, yelling, "Nadja! We don't have to be sexy anymore! We're sane! We'll have to jump!"
The only place to land was in a chain of identifications in the new-tarred street, the stuck-together pebbles that had been someone's business, someone's shovelful.

In an explosively compressed ceremony, the light turns green. I have to hurry.

MATT HART

Reading, Writing, Rithmetic

"What's true? The men get To push the buttons."


You call them elevators. Well, who cares? - Both words the right ring."

Obstacles to be scaled:

It was reading whilst writing, going cross-eyed,

paper cuts opening on the hollows of its keyboard,

the poems slipping into each other. What's true?
Today is Friday: wet, and a good day to stay indoors.

Three umbrellas hurl past its window. Mary, Dick and Gene (their American friend) all wave in the wind. Through the glass they predict the next stanza -

The rain began promptly at ten to ten. Each hour threatened a greater downpour, every second swelling the hot air.

At 40th Street the bill poster running for cover. Ink trails and the pulp in his arms.

This is the first poem, second section, part four, in a small press chapbook, tooled in purple and azure.

This is the blurb on the back of the flysheet.

ISBN. Dates. Call number.

This is a proscribed text.

It is dirty, inflammatory and, luckily for us, inflammable.

Light the taper. Stand well back. Close your biscuit tin, bread bin or durable fireproof receptacle.

No card or paper. Only hardened wood.

The father remarried. It will always be glad of that.

There was a bonfire, fireworks; a guest dies whilst it ran in a garden, with matches, in ashes. Proudly, it spelt out the names of spent incendiaries.

It puts it foot through a photo of a garden it stepped into.

And it read, “you turn with a kind of ferocity to a place you love, to which you are native”

Colours leached up its white skin; its feet green with a shadow of silver.

There is always someone still learning to read. We call this Basic Education, careful to keep the stress off the first word.

One thing it learnt quickly: that spaces are endings (that closing of covers is final
A CONVERSATION WITH HARRYETTE MULLEN

Farah Griffin, Michael Magee / 1997

MM: Should we ask Harryette about Gil [Ott] first? Since that’s how this all got started? I’ve read interviews with you before where you talked about you’re interest in “language poetry,” you’re relationship with it. So, I guess I was wondering about you’re relationship with Gil as a publisher and whether those two things fit together, whether you were thinking about those two things together when all that began - when Spermkit/Supermarket [S*PerRM***K*7] came out.

HM: Well, I met Gil actually when I read in Philadelphia. Gil actually had invited me and another poet at the Painted Bride Center, art center, when he used to work there, before all the budget cuts eliminated his job. That must have been five or six years ago. And I can remember that there were six people in the audience. Rachel was there, Rachel Duplessis was there, and some other people, and, you know, so I had come all the way, at that time, from Ithaca, New York, to Philadelphia and read to six people, but it resulted in those two books, “Spermkit” and Muse and Drudge. He asked at the time if either of us had a short manuscript up and ready to go. I think because at that time he had already received a grant, I guess from your state’s Arts Council and the poet he was supposed to publish had backed out at the last minute. So it was really kind of a fortuitous accident. I mean I just happened to be invited to read, I think because Gil knew the other poet who also was coming from Ithaca. So, we read together and I was the one who had a thirty-two page manuscript that was ready to go. That’s how “Spermkit” got published. So it was very much just kind of a coincidence - you know, a very happy coincidence for me - and he told me later that “Spermkit” was the first book that he had done that broke even, and that if I had another one he would like to do it too, so that’s how Muse and Drudge got published. I mean, two books, these two books would not exist without Gil Ott, “Supermarket” or “Spermkit,” and Muse and Drudge, from Singing Horse Press. He has been just... so good to work with. Because he is a poet, you know, he has a whole long history of publishing other poets. His magazine, Paper Air. And he has a care and concern, you know, that this work should get out. And I think he’s also been very much made conscious and aware by the surrounding, you know, here in Philadelphia, and the kinds of work that he’s done. He’s worked with homeless people, he’s worked as a community outreach person at the Painted Bride Arts Center. And his wife Julia Blumenreich who is also a poet and also has a journal that she co-edits, 6ix. That she’s a teacher and has been very much in touch with the diversity, socio-economically and racially, in Philadelphia - so I think they’re very sensitive to those kinds of issues. And that has helped, you know, in just working with the press. So... and it’s just been very easy. You know I

just... because he understands, I think, what I’m doing, and that just makes everything so much better. And he requested the work. I mean, it’s been... I have been very lucky as a poet because each one of my books has been a book that was requested. Lee Ann Brown published trimmings with her Tender Buttons Press and it was almost a kind of just destiny that you knew, I happened to have been thinking about Tender Buttons, the Gertrude Stein book - and her press is named for that book - and so someone, you know, brought us together in a way. And I think that, again, with Gil it was just the sort of an accident that I happened to be invited and that became the beginning of our association with him being my publisher. And then that he did the photographs for “Supermarket,” he went to his local supermarket, he took these pictures. We sort of collaborated on the photograph of this black woman [on the cover of Muse and Drudge]. She’s someone who lives here in Philadelphia, I mean, I, you know, I kept asking Gil, you know, he got the photograph from a friend of his and, you know, we were sort of restricted in terms of how much we could pay anyone for a photograph so I had tried to get photographs from some other people and they were just going to charge too much for a small press, you know, basically non-profit publisher to pay. So he found this photography and we kind of worked with it to make it... she was this... image of this woman who has her eyes closed and she could be singing, she could be praying, her hands sort of look like she could be praying or she could be clapping along as she’s singing and there’s something kind of soulful about her, you know. And the idea of, you know, this black woman being both muse and drudge was really important to me and I really wanted an image of a black woman on the cover. And, you know, Gil completely understood that, he helped me find this photograph, you know. And, I mean, I think he... he’s just very sensitive and attuned to what people are trying to do with their work. And I really have appreciated that.

........

And he, you know, before Rachel Duplessis and Bob Perelman and Ron Silliman came to this area, Gil Ott was pretty much, you know, trying to reach out and continue to have his connections to poets all over the country, and I think that you’ve got a really, it seems to me, very exciting activity going on here in Philadelphia, but that has not always been the case. All the years that Gil Ott has been here trying to create something, you know, and so I think finally he’s beginning to see a community around him, and students coming through these various programs, that he’s got some company now, you know? He’s not going to be... just be a lonely voice trying to do what he’s doing and I think that’s very important, that he can see, in a way, the results of these years of sticking it out, you know, when it wasn’t so easy.

But, I’m not really answering your question, which was about... it was this other poet who actually, um, was my husband at the time [laughter]... I was trying to avoid that, but, I don’t think I can. Who dragged me into the language camp, in a
way, I mean, I really didn’t know those people. I had come from Texas to Northern California. I was in graduate school at Santa Cruz. I was reading all of this theory as a graduate student in Literature at UC-Santa Cruz. So, at that point when I would, you know, be taken to these talks and readings, um, you know, I had a context for it. I think if I hadn’t been in graduate school at the time it would have been very different. I listened, I paid attention, you know I was interested in what people were doing and I could see the relation to what I was reading in school, although of course no one at the university was dealing with the work of these poets. But these poets read the same theory that my professors did - in fact they probably read twice as much, and had read the same theory earlier than a lot of my professors had, and they were highly intellectual poets. There’s a kind of model of American poets that is very anti-intellectual and they were so much not-that, you know it was impressive to see them, and they were so organized and so committed to what they were doing. And they were saying interesting things. And I had to take that into, you know, the background, the traditions, that I had come up with and to see, well, how can any of this apply to me and the work that I’m doing. For instance, the idea of problematizing the subject. You know, because our kind of joke of minority (and some women) graduate students was, “It’s that white male subjectivity that needs to be…” you know, we just put a moratorium on that, and the rest of us need to step up to the plate, you know (laughter). We need our subjectivity. And then I began to think, well, in what ways would I want to problematize my black female subjectivity and going to California from Texas was one of the experiences that sort of gave me some ideas about that because, for instance, where I grew up, in Fort Worth, Texas, and I was born in Alabama, you know in the South, basically, you see a black person, you speak to that person whether you know them or not. You sort of assume that there’s this brotherly, sisterly attachment, I mean, even if it is in some cases very superficial. In California, no, I walk up to people, they don’t even make eye-contact, or they’re, you know, their whole idea of who they are is so utterly different from who I think they might be just because they’re black. So, I thought about my first book, Tree Tall Woman, which is very much in the sort of authentic voice mode, you know, of the person who speaks from the black family, from the black community, and, um, you know, that idea of who was a black person - I mean I, without even consciously thinking about it, I think I more or less assumed a black person was someone with Southern roots and someone who ate collard greens and some one who was probably a Protestant, you know, and I had to just rethink all of that. And so those were ways that I began to relate what I did in my work to what they were doing. You know, I had to rethink what they were doing in other terms. And maybe that’s answering your question or beginning to answer your question.

--------

MM: It seems like the ways that I’ve read you talking about Texas, that there seems to be some relationship between that and...a way in which you were thinking about Texas as a kind of borderland space.

HM: Right. ‘Cause definitely, particularly in Fort Worth which, unlike say Dallas or Houston, has a relatively small black population. The population of Chicanos is much larger in Fort Worth, or at least it was when I was a child. So I kind of had the feeling we were growing up between the Anglos and, as we called them then, the Mexicans, you know. So, there was a sense of Spanish being spoken; there was a sense of a black Southern vernacular being spoken, which my family didn’t exactly really speak. I sound more Southern now than I did when I was a kid. And, you know, partly I sound more Southern, I guess, because I had to sort of get with the program and blend in, ‘cause my mother, my grandmother, the people who I grew up with, were from Pennsylvania - they were from Harrisburg And so, you know, my whole relationship to black English, like that of a lot of middle class black people, is, you learn that to keep your butt from getting beat in the streets. You know, what you spoke at home was basically what I would call black standard English, you know, and you learned this vernacular on the streets in order to have some friends out there. And so the sort of naturalizing of black English as the way that black people are supposed to speak and write is something that is very problematic for me. I mean, I enjoy having various registers and I enjoy throwing Spanish words into my poems, you know, and I think that a variety of languages and dialects makes life more interesting. You know, Langston Hughes’ motto says, “I play it cool and dig all jive and that’s the reason I’m alive. My motto is I live and learn, is to dig and be dug in return.” And the more people you can talk to and understand the richer your life and experience can be, potentially. But also we learn these languages and these dialects and these ways of presenting ourselves in an atmosphere of coercion, you know? There’s the coercion of school which says - and work places - you must speak this way or you will not be employable; and then there’s the coercion of the streets: you can’t hang with us if you talk too proper, you know? And on both sides there’s coercion, so that’s something to bear in mind when we’re talking about language, is that there is violence, there is coercion, there is force involved in making people conform to a particular way of speaking, writing and so forth.

MM: Roles of authority inscribed in all sorts of vernaculars.

HM: Yes, Mm-hm.

FG: Is that why - I’m thinking particularly about Muse and Drudge - where there are so many different languages and different registers of language, and I was wondering, when you are writing in that way, are you imagining at all a reader who has access to all of them?

HM: No [laughter]. Because I don’t really have access to all of them. I can put Spanish words in there because I did take Spanish classes and I grew up around
people speaking Spanish but I am not a Spanish speaker by any means. So I
don't really have access to Spanish in the way that a Spanish speaker does and I
don't really have, I mean, I think I threw a couple of Portuguese words in there
and a couple of French words in there. It's just a kind of gesture at multiplicity
and, you know, heteroglossia. Also, the poem was a process for me, you know, I
was throwing in black vernacular from Clarence Major's dictionary Juba to Jive.
You know I would find something really juicy and say, "Oh, I've got to put this
in," or you know I have something that I got from you Farah [laughter], "washing
her nubia." You know, I just said, this is got to, you know, I've got to use this
somehow. So, I was, you know, picking up all of these threads like the little
magpie that I am and weaving them into this poem. So, I don't think, I mean a
reader who had not just followed me through my whole life while I was writing
this poem would not necessarily have access, and one of the things I enjoy when
I'm reading that poem is seeing the smiles and the laughter and the nodding
heads sort of move around the room. You know, the young people will get some
things, the older people will get other things, the white people getting one joke
and the black people are getting other joke, and people who speak Spanish
are getting some other joke, and the laughter kind of just ripples around the
room. And I really enjoy that.

FG: When did, um, one of the things when I hear you read and when I read what
you've written, there's just, I have this sense of someone who just loves to
play...

HM: Mm-hm.

FG: ...with words, and that there's just this kind of fascination and obsession
with - and playfulness - in terms of your relationship to language. I was wonder-
ing, which came first for you? I mean, when did you recognize that you had this
fascination with the playfulness of language? Did that come very early on,
before you identified yourself as a poet, so to speak, or did they come together?
How did that relationship with language take place?

HM: I think that very much in one way comes from the tradition of the commu-
nity because we were always spouting poetry. You know when I think about the
way that I remember the black community that I grew up in it was mainly orga-
nized into experiences at church, experiences at school, maybe some kind of yard
and playground experiences, and then what happened at home. And, at school
and at church we were always called on to memorize and recite poems - a whole
lot of Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar
especially, those were like the three that everybody could quote something from,
and you had these occasions when you had to perform, you were expected to get
up there and say your peace. And then there was all the sort of playground,
jump-rope rhyme, circle games. I mean all of the games that we played were - at
least that the girls played - were very verbal games that involved rhyming along
with some sort of physical activity, you know, show your motion and jumping
rope and little Sally Walker and all of that. And then we had, in the interplay
between the girls and the boys, and what the boys did with one another - the
sort of dozens, capping, signifying, verbal duels - you know, when people begin
to be sort of pre-adolescent there's all this kind of pseudo-courtship, formulaic
exchanges that people have, you know, "What's cookin', good lookin'?" and,
you know, the girl says, "Ain't nothin', cookin' but the beans in the pot, and they
wouldn't be if the water wasn't hot" [laughter]. You know, we knew to say that,
so, we would... and then, every now and then someone would invent a new
rhyme, you know, and that would be incorporated into everybody's collective
repertoire. So I think that that was just the sort of environment that we were all
growing up in, and we may have had similar experiences.

FG: Right. Now I find it interesting that you say that given that - I'm thinking
here both in terms of your work as a critic and the interviews that I've read with
you and the conversations that we've had where you sort of challenge the
notion of a black literary tradition being based only in a oral vernacular tradition.

HM: Right.

FG: So, do you want to talk a little bit about that challenge? I mean, because you
immediately went to the vernacular oral tradition.

HM: Mm-hm. It's there. You know I say that that commonplace exists because
of, you know, a very common sense observation of what really does happen but
at the same time, although Dunbar, Hughes and James Weldon Johnson were
working with a vernacular tradition in their poetry, it was written, and we had
access to it through books. And writing something down changes it. Turning
something into a poem changes it. Langston Hughes didn't write blues poems
that were exactly like the traditional blues. He did something else to them. He
was in a way digesting the blues tradition and synthesizing it with other tradi-
tions in order to create this poetry. And Dunbar didn't write down exactly the
way people spoke dialect, in fact standard English was his first, you know,
language and, uh... growing up in Ohio and, you know, being the one black
student in his class, you know he spoke standard English. And he wrote all
those poems in standard English and traditional verse. So, there's the balance
between the two and, you know, a speakerly text may also be a very writerly text.
When I look at Invisible Man, it's both.

FG: Right.

HM: Just trying to acknowledge that other aspect of what really is our tradition.
We've been writing practically since folks got off the boat.

FG: Right. Right. What do you think, have there been any costs to the way we
HM: I think that it... it erases some of the complexity of what it is that we do, what our tradition is. Our tradition... I think that people wanted to define what is distinctively African or African-American as opposed to what comes from European tradition, and writing is seen as European. I think that people have to reexamine the African traditions to see that Africans did write and that Africans may not have used writing in the same ways that Europeans did - it was much more involved with communication with spirit than with communication with living human beings. So we have to first of all reexamine the idea that Africans only had oral traditions and didn't have written traditions because there are these examples of African script systems. Not necessarily what all scholars would define as writing but... and then we have to think about, well, what has happened since we've been here and the way that we, you know, our culture is synchroized with European, with Native American, cultures and that its a more complicated picture.

FG: And so, thinking of it that way, then it's not so odd to have a Harryette Mullen emerge who is in relation both with a black vernacular tradition and with the workings of a movement of language poets as well. It's not such an anomaly.

HM: Not at all. I mean, I think that in creating a tradition and a canon according to particular principles that have to do with orality and speakerliness... what happens is that it's a kind of circular logic so that anyone who hasn't fit into that is pushed to the side... you know, a Melvin Tolson, who people said, well, he doesn't write in Negro, you know, or he's trying to out-Pound Pound [laughter]. You know that person becomes lost, or forgotten for a while. I think that we're beginning to remember the Tolsons and, you know, and the Bob Kaufmans and the Jean Toomers, and to see that there is this tradition, and I mean its... the logic of saying that your tradition is one particular thing is that what doesn't fit, that supposedly anomalous writer who's erased, and then for the next generation its as if their starting all over from scratch. So each generation is being denied this history of innovation, formal experimentation, of a writerly text, that may also be speakerly at the same time, may also be musical - I mean if we say that speech and music as, you know, Steven Henderson in "Understanding the New Black Poetry," that very influential introduction to that anthology, tried to define, well, what is blackness in literature? And he talked... he very much stressed speech and music, but he also said "speech" includes the speech of the most educated, the most literate, the most, uh, sort of dictionary-bearing, you know, members of the community as well. So, our notion of what speech is would have to be expanded.

FG: Right.
HM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And then there are other people, like a very useful essay Erica Hunt did called “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics,” which is in a book that Charles Bernstein edited that’s called, I think, The Politics of Poetry, and... or, The Politics of Poetic Form, I believe may be the actual title. And then there are essays here and there - Will Alexander has an essay called, “Alchemy as Poetic Kindling,” and, you know, there was an issue, a special issue focusing on black post-modernist poetry of American Book Review that came out, I think, in 1996 that Cecil Giscombe edited and... so there are beginning to be these discussions, and this kind of tradition, alternative tradition, alternative black tradition.

MM: I wanted to ask one more thing about Mackey that I was thinking about in relation to your work. It seems like one connection between your two projects is this... this sort of ability to develop your own symbolic economy, and so as a reader you have to allow your self to sort of just get into the game, which is a different game than you’re accustomed to I’m thinking in terms of language games.

HM: Mm-hm.

MM: So Mackey, in one way, if you’re uncomfortable with postmodernism maybe, at first might seem like jargon, right? Or, you wonder whether he’s borrowing from a kind of postmodern jargon, and the more you read the more you realize that it’s his own language.

HM: Discrepant engagement!

MM: Invented, right? Yeah.

HM: Himself, he talks in the introduction of the book how his notion of discrepant engagement comes from the Dogon of Mali, you know, and their term for a... they have a... something they call “the creaking of the word,” which has to do with the loom that they weave cloth on and the idea that you’re weaving together images or ideas, you know, philosophies, and so, and discrepant having an etymological connection to the word “creak,” creaking, you know, the noise that’s made by this loom when people are weaving. And so, something that may sound very abstract and not connected to anything African turns out to be directly from an African tradition of philosophical and aesthetic ideas and concepts, and he’s directly borrowing from them.

MM: And that’s how he ends Bedouin Hornbook, right? I think “The Creaking of the Word” is the last passage.

HM: Right. Yes. So, you know, you can’t assume automatically that you know where somebody got something because, just because someone thought of something here or in Europe doesn’t mean it wasn’t also thought of in other places in the world.

MM: And do you see your work in relation to that sort of methodology?

HM: I see definitely that I’m trying to look at what’s been seen as a split for a lot of people. You know, Ron Silliman, in “The New Sentence,” talks about... I think there’s an essay called “The Political Economy of Poetry,” and he ends it by talking about this perceived division between what are called the “Aesthetic Schools of writing” and the “codes of oppressed peoples,” and he says, well of course, the aesthetic schools are not without their politics or their ideologocal stance, they just express it through these aesthetic means and procedures. And I would want to add that - I don’t think he does but I would want to add - the codes of oppressed peoples also have their aesthetic basis, you know, and one thing that Mackey points out in Discrepant Engagement, he’s following the work of Robert Farris Thompson who has done a lot, a scholar, you know, who is Euro-American who’s done a lot of work on African Diaspora cultures, and that, you know, within these cultures there is a long tradition of what he calls songs and dances of allusion. And so Nate grabs on to that idea that something can be very swinging, something can be very much something that wants to make you get up and move, shake your butt, or whatever, and still have, you know... it’s aesthetic and it also has a message to communicate. You know, that there are... there’s this whole tradition of satiric songs and of dances that actually have to do with cosmology, you know, or with the well-being of the community, so that those codes of oppressed peoples - I mean if you look at something like Zora Neale Hurston’s Mules and Men where she’s dealing with folklore of people who were not very well educated but its a very philosophical discourse when you look and see what these people are saying, what are they talking about, how they bring the whole world into their discussion, so that those codes of oppressed peoples which are imagined as some kind of impoverished discourse really are very rich, very aestheticized, very metaphorical. I mean they’re doing everything that poetry does. And so, I mean, think that one of the things that Nate Mackey wants to emphasize and he also emphasizes it in his discussion of Baraka - that Baraka always insisted that the avant-garde needed to be held accountable for its politics, you know, and also, you know, he could quote Mao Tse-tung and say that, you know, all art is propaganda, but he would also not forget to say the second half, which is that not all propaganda is art [laughter] you know, so that once you have a commitment to look at each one of these things, you know, and to see, well, what is lacking on the one hand and what’s lacking on the other hand and how do you combine the energy? I think Erica Hunt also in her essay on oppositional poetics is saying, language-centered art is not going to change the world by itself. You need some kind of political commitment, some kind of action, and some kind of coalition with other people who have the same vision that you have. We’re going to get out there with some energy, you know, and take care of business. And you don’t have just one or the other, you need the combined energy of both. If you want your artistic activity to be connected to
some political activity.

FG: Do you see that... might that be a reason, then, why there's this tendency to look at the Black Arts movement as, you know, the moment in black poetry in the way that we do because it is so obviously connected to a social and political movement at the same time, whereas those connections, those linkages, are less obvious, if not absent, in different forms. You think that that might be one of the reasons why so much of the kind of attention that is given to Black Arts poets or the Black Arts movement as a movement does not happen to more avant-garde poets?

HM: I think that, if I can try to sort out, that's a... I think you're asking me a lot of different things.

FG: Mm-hm.

HM: But, on the one hand, it was a founding moment. It was... I think it was something that needed to happen. There was a... it was a moment of clarification. And also, in some ways, it's a response to a possible failure. I mean, I would think that we have not integrated yet, and we're not even sure that we want to integrate, you know, I mean I think that that's kind of what I feel in... I mean I feel like I'm one of the last integrationists because I still believe in integration but when I look around me it's as if people are saying, well, that was just an experiment that failed, we just don't want to do that. But the Black Arts movement was, I think, a moment when - and all of that sixties activism - had to do with black people saying, well, you know, we have been here a long time and we're still not really here, you know, and so we need to build something of our own. And I think that's really what you, know, what made that moment different from... I mean, I think there were those impulses, say in Garveyism and in other social formations but this was a time when large numbers of black people really said, "We've been beating on this wall for so long, you know, beating, beating, beating. It's still there and we need to just turn elsewhere and create something for ourselves, and create an alternate identity which has to do with being black and does not necessarily have to do with joining the rest of America." And I think that was very important, I think it was useful, I think it was a moment of clarity. I don't think that that should be the end of the discussion. And I also think that, in terms of the art that was produced, for some people, you know, the art became formulaic. Not for all people, I mean, like I say, if you look at Baraka and the variety and the, you know, the mobility, you know, of his thought and of his work - the way that he went from one thing to another. As opposed to, say, well, I won't name names, but some other people who really kind of got in a groove and stayed there, and their work really did change much.

MM: Baraka has that line that sticks in my mind in relation to this. He says, "LeRoi Jones, the only black poet in the New American Poetry," which seems absolutely about that, banging on the door and not gaining entry, and so in a way it seems like he's in this awful and ironic position in the early sixties, where he is supposed to be the representative, and yet he's the kind of token guy, which must have been an incredibly frustrating position to be in.

HM: Well, it's dangerous to be the only one. That is a psychically damaging position to be in. And I say that as someone who has been in those situations.

FG: I was going to ask you to elaborate on that [laughter].

HM: Well, I mean, one reason I wrote Muse and Drudge is because having written Tree Tall Woman, you know, and when I went around reading from that book there were a lot of black people in my audience. There would be white people and brown people and other people of color as well. Suddenly, when I went around to do readings of Trimmings and "Spermkit," I would be the one black person in the room, reading my poetry, I mean, a room which typically had no other people of color in it- which, you know, I could do, and... it was interesting. But that's not necessarily what I wanted, you know, and I thought, "How am I going to get all these folks to sit down together in the same room?" Muse and Drudge was my attempt to create that audience. That would come together, those people that were interested in the formal innovation that, you know, I... that emerged when I was writing Trimmings and "Spermkit," partly because I was in those books, responding to the work of Gertrude Stein, you know, so those audiences picked up on that, and I had been hanging out with these language writers in the Bay Area, and listening to them and reading their work, so there was all of that influence as well. And then I thought, okay, well, I'm going to need to do something to integrate this audience, because it felt uncomfortable to be the only black person in the room reading my work to this audience. And, I mean, it was something that I could do and something that I felt, "Well, this is interesting," you know, "This tells me something about the way that I'm writing now," and I didn't think I was any less black in those two books or any more black in Tree Tall Woman but I think that the way that these things get defined in the public domain is that, yeah, people saw "Spermkit" as being not a black book but an innovative book. And this idea that you can be black or innovative, you know, is what I was really trying to struggle against. And Muse and Drudge really was my attempt to show that I can do both at the same time.

FG: Why do you think that that distinction happens so much in writing? I mean I think that when we think of music, particularly jazz music...

HM: Yes!

FG: One has to be both...

HM: There's all that room for the avant-garde to go out.
FG: And it’s expected that...

HM: To go way out.

FG: ...to be black is to be innovative.

HM: Yeah!

MM: Parker can talk about Stravinsky, right?

HM: Yes!

MM: And nobody blinks an eye.

FG: Right. In fact he ought to, right? So, what is it about writing, I mean, what is it that when the forms shift that one has to be either/or? In terms of your audiences, in terms of the critics, everything, what is it about those different forms?

HM: I have wondered about that myself and there are references to that in Muse and Drudge, you know, like the “occult iconic crow” going “way out / on the other side of far” (40), and I’m thinking of someone like a Thelonious Monk, you know, who could just be out, and people just said, “Well, that’s where he is” [laughter].

FG: And maybe we’ll go with him.

HM: Yeah, you could take a ride on the Sun Ra spaceship, you know [laughter], and I wonder if it is because not everyone plays a musical instrument or knows everything about music and so is more willing to say, “Well, these are the experts and we will allow them to take us to these weird places,” whereas everyone who speaks the language, you know, “Well, I wrote a poem once,” you know, and so, if you do that in language - and, you know, if you use certain kinds of words - then somehow you’ve left this familiar territory and you’re now taking us somewhere we don’t want to go. And, I don’t know, I think the musicians are maybe just given more leeway than the writers are because the writers... I mean, people have this notion that the writers are supposed to talk to them in their language, you know, and if there’s something that’s unfamiliar, something that’s unknown, that’s an imposition on the audience, to have to deal with this thing that is not immediately understandable. Whereas with music you just kind of go with it.

MM: You can kick back and listen to it too, right, so at the worst you’re going to say, well, Monk is weird. But it’s not... when you read it’s hard, and confusing, and it takes this kind of active figuring-out of what’s going on.

HM: Well, you know, one time when I was teaching this course in slave narratives - and this was at, actually, UC-Santa Barbara where I was temporarily teaching - and these students said, “They don’t sound black, and they’re using all of these big words,” people like Equiano and Frederick Douglass. “Frederick Douglass sounds so formal and so rhetorical and he’s not down,” you know, and, “He’s not folksy,” you know, and Equiano is using all of these big words and, you know, how did they get all of these big words? And “I have to go to the dictionary,” and they sort of resented that they would have to go to the dictionary to look up words used by someone who had been a slave, you know - and before that didn’t even speak English. And I said, well, you know, these guys were autodidacts, they didn’t grow up with “See Spot Run,” you know, they just had to take what was out there and get the dictionary or whatever they had, you know, and just learn. And that’s what happens when you are just open to learning.

MM: It seems like... I was reading it this morning again and it seems like the way that you’re navigating the relationship between race and gender in “Spermkit” is just extremely complex and thought out. I mean, were you thinking about it in those terms?

HM: I think I was. Maybe not always explicitly but it is there in my thinking about, well, what kind of person is the consumer imagined to be? And the consumer, you know, except, say, in a beer commercial that shown during the Monday Night Football is usually imagined to be a woman. So, I saw that as a connection to the previous book, Trimmings. And, in fact both of these books are in some way reflections on [Stein’s] Tender Buttons and, you know, Tender Buttons has a three part division into “Objects,” “Rooms,” and “Food.” And I have had it in the back of my mind to do something about houses and space and rooms. But basically you could sort of say Trimmings is objects and “Supermarket” is food. And... so I was thinking about domestication, about the role of women, women as consumers, women having a, you know, a supposed power as consumers but also being disempowered in other ways - and also disempowered in some ways as consumers even as they’re being appealed to. So, because of the limited images that you can kind of purchase your accouterments for. You know, you can’t necessarily buy who you really want to be. You have to buy what you know, what’s available for you to be. So, I think that... and also race, I mean, because especially since I’m dealing with a whole retrospective view of television, I mean, because when television... you know, my memories of my early childhood with television - and I did grow up all the way with TV - but that... and we were rationed, you know how much TV we could watch and we couldn’t watch every program but the commercials, which have such an impact, you know. And when you are a small black child seeing no black people unless they’re in uniforms, unless they’re serving white people, and what does that... you know, even though that’s not the case now, you know, we have all these people who are, you know, my age and older who have that... we have that in our heads.
Somewhere it's in there, it's a part of our programming. And... you know, and it has had an impression. So, I think that... and also television was an occasion for learning in our household, in terms of my mother and saying... she used to analyze, she used to do critique of what was on the television. For instance, when we would watch "Romper Room," then we would want to go to the store and buy the milk that the Romper Room lady, and the ice-cream that the Romper Room lady, you know, fed the kids, you know, on TV, and... you know, she explained to us, you know, very clearly, "She is paid to endorse this product. This product is no better than the other product that costs less. We are not buying the higher priced milk just because they use it on the show," and you know, "Don't even... I don't even want to here that anymore" [laughter]. Or when we wanted the Barbie Doll and she said, "There's no way that I am buying you all a doll who has more clothes than all three of us put together" [laughter]. You know, so we got this kind of lesson and I think that "Spoomkit" very much comes out of that kind of session of critique. Because we did not sit like zombies in front of the TV. There was always a conversation. My mother would be sitting there saying, "That's a lie" [laughter]. You know, or...

FG: "That woman's not that pretty" [laughter].

HM: Right, exactly, you know. And... you know, and I'm sure that we must have had discussions about why black people weren't on, or no black people that looked like anybody that we knew were on, or why this person always has to be serving, you know, this middle class white family. You know, we had discussions about that as well. So, my whole experience of TV and advertising is through that kind of critique that was just a part of what we did in our household. Did I answer your question?

FG: Where are you now? What are you... what's next? What are you working through, what kinds of issues or ideas in your own writing? Are you post-Muse and Drudge?

HM: Well, I certainly wanted to... not to repeat Muse and Drudge. I think Muse and Drudge hit a lot of nerves and, judging from the audiences that I see now, it has done what I wanted it to do because I'm now reading to an integrated room, which makes me feel more comfortable, but the poems that I read the other day in the [Temple] Gallery - you were there in that audience - they're prose poems, they are attempting to write, in a way, outside my body. So... Muse and Drudge also was really useful and productive for me because I use a lot of quotation in Muse and Drudge, I use a lot of what's in the air in Muse and Drudge, and so I think what I'm trying to do now is push that a little further. Because with Muse and Drudge I was concerned to encompass a large generous view, inclusive view, of sort of what African tradition, Diaspora culture tradition, language, languages, you know, could be. And, you know, to think about that in terms of say, through the lens of a black woman. And now, I think the pieces that I'm doing are an