

The First Three Books

Beverly Dahlen

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Robert Duncan's "Afterword: Beverly Dahlen's *The Egyptian Poems*"
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The First Three Books

Out of the Third (1974)

*One becomes two, two
becomes three, & out
of the third comes
the one as the
fourth.*

To the memory of my grandmothers:

Anna Liisa Jarva

Born in Finland, December 19, 1885

Died in Portland, Oregon, May 15, 1950

Mary Magdalene Dahlen

Born in Oakland, Nebraska, September 24, 1883

Died in Portland, Oregon, October 3, 1973

Gesture

It is a gesture I do
that grew
out of my mother
in me.

I am trying to remember
what she
was afraid to say
all those

years, fingers folded
against her mouth,
head turned away.

from *This Other World*

1.

hard going
a road down the middle of Nebraska
black train
lights in the windows
red sun over the silos
the Continental Divide is a grain elevator
an old car goes down the other side
Medicine Bow, Wyoming
Indian territory
inventory
green sun on the water

whisper

you aren't giving me any cake
my cave hurts
my stomach is filled with moss

dog's bark looks like a footprint in snow
there are stars in the bottom of the well

all the goddesses are wooden
they all have wooden masks
they all sit in a row

two have the face of the black sun
their colors are yellow and black
they look out
they face one direction
they are angry

shoes

what do you think you're going to do with your bare feet?

it wasn't a long tradition either

2.

a door opens

no one walks in

there are 5 others with him

they stand around in the room

you know they are there by the noise they make in the back of your neck

3.

I know that the inside of my head is shaped like a cube

I see it whenever I take a breath

Also the floor of this cube is slanted and the breath runs across it and plunges
down from this ledge 50 feet or so and comes to rest in a narrow dark pool
from which it flows away quietly into a darkness I can't see

4.

Breathing out is called God-killing

the turn of the breath is the root of the cross

the sign of the stranger

everyone crying in the wilderness

5.

Epigram from childhood:

you shall have

a box a cauldron a finger

a tomb a lap an ocean

sunset over all

Black Train

My backbone is a black train.
I start on the grass. It moans for me.
It will lay down and burn for me.
You will see its smoke for years and years.
It will lay out in one direction
in the wind
yellow against the blue sky.
I will lick it with my sides.
It will not hold me.
It will fall away forever towards the mountains.
I will cross the river. I will come
to black trees. They will stare at me.
I will carry them. I will carry them.
I will carry them down
to the ocean. You will see them
gone white in the sun. They will be
quiet. Their eyes will float out to sea.
They will not know me. They will not know my name.
I will make a voice. It will be alone.
You will hear it all night long falling away
towards the west. It will carry you.

Dream

the dream means: I wish my mother
would die. It means I wish you
would turn into a girl and all your fingers and toes
would be bleeding. It means blue leaves red behind
blue cancels red they fight with each other. It means
fall. It means a big white bird flew over the building
just now. It means the word fix so that my right arm
would be broken and put in a cast and I could make
decorations on it. It means the word fix so that every-
thing stays in one place. It means the word fix so that
everything turns to stone. It means the nun went
blind from beating too many children. It means the
first boy I ever saw naked was deaf and dumb. It means
I skin black and white rabbits alive for your dinner
and for my mother and my father and my sister
and I can't find out how to turn on the lights
in the kitchen and finally it is night
and no one comes home.

Dream of the Dead Baby

a baby dies and no one understands why
we left her wrapped asleep in the woods by some big rocks
did she starve? we weren't gone long
she was so small
o this underground trail
I don't know whose baby
the tall man carries her body wrapped in blankets
we are young our long hair is a veil it
falls across our faces as we kiss
we walk to the stone house on the uphill path
we do not live outdoors
these stones are built here as in a garden a picture
we sit in the room and talk to our friends
some are drinking wine

The Mountains Again

So here we are in the mountains again.
I tell you '5,000 feet up I'm used to living
at sea level.' Using the third person.
That's possible. There are always at least
three persons in any situation. Mother, Father,
and me. Me as usual in the backseat and daddy
driving recklessly on the mountain roads.
What is not usual is my mother's calm
and my expressed terror
and my father's *very dark: why is he so angry?*

Who is the third person? Is it you, me,
he, she? However I figure that adds up to *two*.
The third person is possible as *two* plus *one*
or *one* alone. 'Stop the car,' she says
'I'll walk home.'

Riff

He had gone somewhere down to the river. I found him later building something he said insane. I said crazy isn't everything dying isn't funny. He said he didn't have anything to save. He said his life was bought and paid for. I said some people just take a walk in the woods and never come back. He said he didn't have time to get scared. I said it's nice you have so many visitors out in the country. He said go to hell.

I said I thought so.

HE LEAVES HER TANGLED.

I see her sitting on a hillside by a river.

He moves away from her.

I watch her shape turn into a thicket.

She still sits there.

The light comes through her.

Seeing this calms me.

It is a photograph.

Stilled.

Hospital

The side of her head was knocked out
and they stuck a piece of glass in
so the doctors could watch the fish swim.

They didn't give her anything for that.
They cut down on her hair; it was too fat.

Whenever she opened her eyes
a murky green sealight played
on the walls and ceiling.

Otherwise she was warm and dry.
Silence except for the sougning of a faroff buoy.

Right Foot

I thought it was my right foot
but then when
the doctor looked at it he said
maybe I ought to go to the hospital
because it didn't seem right
at all
that it was somebody else's foot

well I thought how
I didn't know how could that happen
when I looked at it
it didn't seem changed
it seemed
more like
a garbage can or
where birds play
or anything like that

it wasn't comfortable and
it didn't hurt
and

I guess that it was o.k.
if you wanted to make it like that
but

Anyway
the bushes grow down and
there are still
about 100 birds in the yard
and everything's
o.k.

I just didn't want
I didn't want to make any sort of
fuss about it then
I just said well o.k.
that's all right if that's
you know
the way it is

I'm not very good
at those torture scenes

I wouldn't
I mean

why
stick around for that?

so

For Darlene Tower

MY FRIEND
DIED OF SUICIDE: JULY 17, 1972

One. Two. How do you do.
Alice. Down the rabbit hole.
Here we go round. A Big Sigh. Lays back
an inch of air in front of my face.
Nowhere beyond. Message: You
are alone. Terminal. As far as
I can see. Upstairs. Downstairs. Dear.
Dear. What's to become
of us all I said. I meant the house
we were going to share. By ocean.
Cozy Corners. Some such. Then
He. Old great big watchamacallit
airplane train hoot ran down my grandma's
grape arbor. How we just practically floated
through the park on Easter Sunday looking as much
like flowers as the light and shade falling all over us.
Our mommy. Mom. Mother dear. She just loved it.
How am I ever going to tell you all this now
you're good and gone. Good. Good. Well.
Float away in the cloddy underground.
Only dancer. Lonely. Didn't we all?

Dear De, Not an elegant a
nother letter forced down in
Victorian prose what good
girls we were. Point your toes.
And heave. Fly away old dear.
Unbind your hair. Grim slant face.
Mask of a cat. Tight bare bones.
Don't
Wait for me.

An Appearance in Clear Weather

I don't understand this light these
burns which finding them go all the way
back to what
not single event
though I can't be sure
I can't remember
what I ran into during the night
what would explain these scars
thick in this morning's wind
this fire must have happened a long time
before I was born
or what was it
a fire?
what could have done this to me

I can't account for the way it seems to keep
growing in the light

THE LAW OF ROCKS

is keeping still.

They do not move against us.

They move. In their own time.

They have no time.

We cannot understand them at all.

Unless they are broken.

That way we eat them.

It keeps us from madness.

A Note from my Tree

Beginning at the skin

I work my way inward along the branches
looking for the one that leads to the ground.

I have been out here a long time now.

Many nights.

They are not sending the rescue teams.

There are too many people lost
in the mountains. The helicopters beat
back and forth looking for bodies.

My brother is stationed

somewhere in the jungle. Here is his picture
with field glasses. He has lost a lot of weight
and can't ever come home.

My father is out in his rowboat alone at night
trying to save people from drowning.

My mother won't come out of the bathroom.

If I am quiet she won't see me.

Tree

“The word *told* is the same thing as *toll*, the fare you have to pay on a bridge for passing.”

—N.N.: a madman
quoted in Géza Róheim’s
Magic and Schizophrenia

what I
said
was
nothing
and you said
I said nothing
and faithless faithless faithless
I heard you say
though what you said was
faceless

(when
they were
a long way off
they didn't know him

(later
when he stuck his hand in
my side

because it cut both ways

A tree fell here yesterday
an old cypress
they laid it out bare
stripped branches from branches and I
brought these home for Christmas

This light
moving up
from below
slowly circling and circling outward from the
heart

chopped
skinned
and stolen

a piece of the true cross

faithless faithless

by their
wounds
you would know them
by this long
turning
backwards
towards the blind
center of this tree
empty
of darkness even
not
even the word

2

O N. N.

in mad

old

country back

east (don't
look

faceless nameless

(I never knew you
dead or alive

invisibles ate you

inside out

the day you were born

cross

to me

the word the word

walking

(come

(quickly

3

this is my father: he is a burning tree

this is my mother: she has no name

the name of my father
is the same as the name of
his father
and his father's name
is the same as
his father's name
and before that I don't know
they all get lost in the ocean

4

I am trying
to learn
to speak
the American language

(I was born here
I'm a native
this is my mother tongue
this is my mother's tongue:

she serves it roasted
sliced fan-shaped
she calls it flank steak

I know it's heart
I won't eat it

5

my mother is a foreigner
her mother spoke nothing
but Finn

she died
strangled

of fishbones
cancer
and salt

(crossed over
oceans
years ago

the old country: what is it?

somebody told me
Finn is a language
that has no root

And so we brought the tree at Epiphany
(Jackie: sister to me)
to a sandy cliff above the Pacific
planted it there and crowned it with the wreath:

ivy
pyracantha
cypress

and torched it. The fire grew instantly
in a single crack rushing the dry needles
each one lit rigid before it collapsed
blown sparks and ashes
smoke sky-blown
the branches laid bare
and black. It is finished.

Over. We do not look at one another.

We don't know the words.

The sky is blue, there is almost no
wind, the sea is below us, out
there.

There have been other fires here.

We come home quietly
drink hot toddy
watching the city from my window.

It is already the new year.

7

Monday face east
in the morning. Striped sky
striped beast.

8

the city burning
at sunset a winter evening
the cold rosy light
on the blank sides of buildings
across the desert same
reptile light on pyramids
gone-eyed close-mouthed sphinx
halfway around the world
crawling nights
trailing sand
fire-bombing scorched earth same
god thirsty all green
sweetwater and forests
laid waste
his stone towers

he eats
his light

For days now
I have been walking around
on the tops of my legs
like an amputee.

Baptism won't cure me.

It was the back of my head
they blasted.

“O Lord, I desired
to desire thee.”

10

GOOD FRIDAY, 1970
FOR GEORGE STANLEY

A plane crosses: the sun winks
and all the flowerpots jump in the shadow
a stick splits in the water
the film snaps
your face goes out, blown into darkness
and everybody breathes *aaaaaaaaahhhhhh*
heads bent over. I lean into my cigarette
waiting for the darkness not to last.

It lasts. They can't fix it.
I fall asleep in my chair
waiting.

I am trying to watch the water
to see where it goes. I can't
tell its shape
except by what contains it.
When it spills I go blind.
Finding you on the stairs
I see clearly. There is

no other way to say this. I dreamed once your head
was a machine. Darkness-measurer. Light-years for eyes.

What if I am dying of the distance
between myself and the moon?

11

Dear Stan,

I DON'T WANT TO BE
THAT WOMAN, ART

that never got her nose broke

WRITTEN FACE DOWNWARD

It darkened. Sound apples.
I put the nutmeg in.
Some of them were eaten right through like labyrinths.
You can't always tell rot from the outside.
Don't start that again, you said again.
She did not do that to you, I said. You
did it and
did it. You rising up
on all your bones. This flesh is no ghost.
I could peel your face back down
to your eye-sockets. I could
say those wells were jewels.
But I won't. That's a lie. Diamonds
don't get worms. You were
supposed to be broken. That knife
in the skull was a tunnel. Let some
light in. You can't say you never
saw me naked. When I run I
run red.

Wept this morning

thinking of Sappho in fragments:
that voice.

Listen. She
isn't there. Mother

how did we come by these pieces?

Who were they?

she says (sitting at the kitchen
 table, that house in Oregon

says
 and I am writing it down

: “I don’t know much about them. They grew up in Helsinki, around there, and in a small town, a suburb of Helsinki—your grandmother came from the north—a place called Oulun Lääni—she was Anna Liisa—she had a sister and a brother. Your grandfather—that was Matti Jarva—was about 8 years old when his father either died or deserted his family. There was a sister. Your grandfather begged for his living. He must have been a very lonely man until he had a family of his own. He came to this country—worked the copper mines in Michigan—and went back to Finland for his wife and his son. I was born here—later—in Hancock, Michigan. They moved west with a group of immigrant Finns—they came to Montana—to the coal mines. We lived in a town named Stockett—the nearest big town was Great Falls.”

It is early September, 1971.
Oregon. I was born here.
I'm a native. My sister.
My brother.

She says

“I have so many regrets. All
the regrets in my family. My own
bull-headedness—”

hard-head

 never
 take that
apart

 that crossed her

brother—my uncle

who he was

my uncle: my brother: my

self

It was years ago. My grandfather
was dying in Portland—a double
amputee—after they cut off the second leg—
woke up and said, “My God, am I still here?”
Uncle Fred was in San Francisco
dying of T.B. Had no family.
Thrown out for drinking. Begged
money for liquor—they said—
from my grandmother on her deathbed.
Shipped out when he could—out to sea.
I never really knew him. He was
a stranger to me.

Walking through the dark house that night—
my own house in Mill Valley—came
to the bedroom door and stopped.
What was in there in the dark was the
chopped up body of my uncle burned
on my bed. Burned black.

Who
were they? And within the year
both dead.

15

Early September, 1971

San Francisco to Portland to Vancouver, B.C.
The sun on my left the West
with the sun going down on it
falling into the sea through windows
through woods

“now goth sonne under wode”

the trees

“me reweth, Marie, they sone and thee”

After a saying of Maria Prophetissa

William. Going to bed.
 Nothing in the first place.
 The circle of candlelight
 outside the circle of darkness.
 Darkness into darkness.
one becomes two
 the dividing light
 the veil of hair
 gray water. Ocean.
 Dust.

Crossing the frontier
 "She is that mare" you say
 "that roams the world" night-
 mare I think *two*
becomes three
 she screams in our sleep.

We fall.
 Worlds and worlds.
 There is no time
 to stay here.

out of the third comes the one as the fourth

It is fulfilled.
 Empty. Crossed.
 crossed crossed

The Way We Live Now

1

did you notice any horror today?

sitting on the streetcar ruminating on the several senses of the words *leaves of grass*: old cow. one foot in the. middle class. Death without Decoration. Nobody's going to smell to High Heaven. You can't have it both ways: you are what you eat. And you just ate 3,422 Peruvian peasants (chew chew) and it doesn't even show. DON'T talk with your mouth full.

I'm not *doing* anything.

I'm just *sitting* here.

at the beach. thinking about Walt Whitman. if it were only true. if you could wipe that out with the barest breath. if you could only wipe that out with your bare breath.

sign sprayed on a wall on Carl St.: "Free the Present from the Past." the invariable present. the invariable past.

this little piggy went to market. the price of bananas is 10¢ a pound. I buy two & one-half pounds. of bananas. this is called being at the top of a food chain. what are the links in this food chain as I come clanking home with my bananas sprayed against tarantulas. In grade school we had the Good Neighbor Policy. We loved South America. We loved Central America. We loved Mexico. I loved Mexico because they had something called The Feast of the Dead where everybody got to eat candy skulls. decorated. with colored frosting.

Don't tell *me* bananas don't glow in the dark. if you think I'm kidding just take a look at this X-ray. it may look like a moonshot to you but it's a bloody hole in my skull and no wind's going to wipe out *those* footprints in the sands of time. and while we're on the subject there are two or three other little

grievances I'd like to point out.

Such as?

such as: don't grind my meat so fine don't wipe my face so clean and don't turn your back on the ocean.

But that's what I *told* you.

That's *exactly* what I've *always*
told you.

What did you always tell me?

Not to turn your back on the ocean.

Fine. then there's something we can agree on.

2

school days. you can't imagine. that's me standing on the brown linoleum in the empty hall. the beginning of bodysnatchers, the mummy's dead hand, the screaming skull.

History: Childhood. I lost my mother at an early age and grew up alone in a garden. Then my real parents found me and put me in this orphanage.

You don't seem to be very friendly
towards the other boys and girls
Why don't you speak to them?
You have to *be* a friend, you know,
before you can *have* friends.

That's me standing alone on the brown linoleum in the empty hall. lined with lockers. after school. I am standing in sunlight. there is a big window just at the bottom of the stairwell where I am standing. across the hall from the kindergarten. there is no one there but me. everyone else has gone home. where am I going?

They said he made a bad record in school right from the beginning but his neighbors all swore that he was a nice friendly guy maybe a little shy but my god who would have thought that the boy next door. cut off his mother's head and hand. murdered everyone in the town of My Lai. in the snow. at Wounded Knee. and buried it in the backyard. and dug it up just in time for Christmas. for Easter.

it grow. it just a baby now but it grow.

3

everything has gone into nothing and the dry spell is here. the Mississippi has flooded for the third time this year. there is salt in my hair. gone. gone. I pretend I am not dead and gone. I pretend my mother finds me in the middle of the night weeping and searching for the lost baby. I pretend I was not drowned.

Gone. Gone. spring comes the rivers rise trees fall down. fields and fields. I pretend I do not know how the dead grow who are their fathers and mothers where they lay in the ground.

Gone. Gone. spring comes the dead rise the desert blooms. I pretend the dead are not drinking the sun eating the moon. I pretend as they do that they do not see me. I pretend they are gone. all gone.

4

pulling the green-chain he said. something going into something else. divided by. the 24 hour clank and whine of the lumber mills. cutting. sawing. burning. the flatlands at the mouth of the Mad River. all farms and haystack sawdust burners. it looks like hell I said. it's my bread and butter.

the air war against trees the least of these among my brothers. who flat-out. click. heart. the core of the peelers. the burnt outer layers drift in the air. stacked up. trimmed. topped. limbed. chained and trucked down from the hills. dumped in the log-pond.

killed in the head. he said he never meant to make anyone suffer. Giant Baby. Mama's Boy. who from his cradle was so huge he played with trees like toothpicks. who was a steeldriving man. was the plow that broke. the heart. and dust ran out. and flooded the sky.

this damned child that is the departed head of our fathers that will not keep quiet. this monstrous head that is fertile with light the size of heat one kernel of the fallen sun the tongue in one lick the whole of the folded skin of the dark earth. this baby boy who from the grave dreamed he would plunder and enlighten the universe. this killer child. this mother's son.

Poor baby, I said. poor poor baby. hugely dead his head an open grave in which he wed death. he said he never meant to make anyone suffer.

April—May, 1973

THE LAST LIGHT YOU CAME TO

Moving West
this coast
No
Other.

The Great Plains a burial mound.
The ditched bodies of women
and Indians.

You creaked over the Divide.
Tons of books in foreign languages
heaped in the backs of wagons.
Corinthian columns lashed on pack-mules
split in the snow.
Oxen in the salt deserts
collapsing under the weight
of Egyptian pyramids.

The late West.

Abbeys and cathedrals on the swarming backs
of Chinese slaves. Hordes of Irish
dragging the Tower of London
towards the Cascades. Rafted down
the Columbia through the red snow.
At the mouth a pot of boiling salt
and the clocks and compasses of Lewis and Clark.
Sacajawea a bewildered pillar pointing
at the sea.

You came at sundown
two or three thousand years later
in the middle of winter.

All the mountains between here and Babylonia
fell down behind you. An open
Way. The last West.

Stretched by the Pacific you dreamed
of the sun at your back. Your shadow
hissed and steamed on the rocks.
The veiled ocean's white belly
cracked to the bone in your dream.

And the stone-loaded ships
hunched over the water
at dawn.

The Occupation

1

The interior colonies.
The flat landlocked sky.
One tree against it.
Horses.
The women and children surrounded.
The old men crippled on the road.

My father at home naming all the vegetables
growing in his garden. My brother camped
with his wife and child in the mountains.
The forests burning.
My father's voice on the telephone naming
crookneck squash zucchini squash corn
tomatoes cucumbers ...

I say the road has been closed for five days
on account of the fires. Several towns
have been evacuated. My mother says
it's because of the weather. I say
the weather has nothing to do with it.
She says maybe I need vitamin B.
I say I feel fine. I ask her
how is my grandmother. She says
she's home from the hospital.
She has cancer. She doesn't know.
No one has told her. No one says the word
dying.

My grandmother pushed to the sea.
All the way from Nebraska. Surrounded.
Refugee. Her back to the mountains.
Burning.

Black water in Oregon.
 The Tualatin River
 under a left-handed sky.
 The crows in my father's garden
 pick and gnaw. He talks.
 The rat he shot in the backyard
 beneath the willow tree. Wood chopped.
 Axe-man. His traps in the old days
 on Sauvies Island. Two-bits an otter skin.
 The way we lived then.

My mother says daddy fix-it. Don't throw a thing
 away. Oh yes. You bet your life. Your dad.
 He knows.

There they are. In the country.
 Cornstalks cut and plowed under
 for the winter. Apples piled up
 in the garage. Everything in order.
 Eating and dying.

My grandma laid out the frown gone.
 Her face still tan to the line
 the scarf came. Dressed in a yellow suit
 I'd never seen. Curled her thin hair.
 How they talk. She passed away.
 Gone in the rainy air.

And because she's gone
 my sister and brother come flying
 and I come overland
 to see the country again. North
 across the border in the middle of the night.
 Medford Grant's Pass Roseburg Eugene.
 Pick-ups with gunracks. Going up
 the hills for their bucks. Food.
 How we talk. Clams. Fish. Ducks.

My brother says K. Falls. Warm springs.
Going hunting. Shoot all the geese
in the world.

What a killing. How we talk.
All we ate. Everything
so good. You bet your life.

3

Passed away. Back down the Willamette Valley
at sunset. Moon in the night.
Sleeping raggedly. Going south for the winter.
Black heart back there at the mouth
of the river. Can't breathe. Chains of bridges
at Portland. She's gone under out to sea.

A turning. In the mountains.
We've come a long way. The ends of the earth.
Thick fog in the valleys.
Here I carry you.
These dead animals.
These raw horns and heads.
The bloody hunchbacked rivers of Oregon.
The moon going down in the west.

Here I carry you alone sleeping
over the border to California
the bones of my crossed hands
in my lap and no words at all in my mouth

and come home in the morning
to my own house.

August—October, 1973

A Letter at Easter: to George Stanley (1976)

1.

In the further sky there are birds flying like we used to draw them in the first grade. Droopy winged V's. Nearer by the jays are showing off in the blooming snowball tree. Flashy. And they chase through the backyards streaking that green with their blue.

The Saturday morning before Easter. *All is calm all is bright.*
After a two-day gale.

You.

Mystery.

The swamp and the lightning. The tar pits. The ice ages.

The *real* world you say. And I say what do you mean, the *real* world? And you, voice edged with anger, impatience, say *This. This. I'm standing in a room. I'm holding a telephone.*

I hear.

You. This. This context. This syntax. This matrix. This material world.

This old mothering split. The crack of doom in which we speak to each other.

Call it a telephone. I'm standing in a room across town listening.

*

2.

Easter, then.

People keep coming and going.
Friends return from South Carolina and tell me about the real
swamps there, real alligators and snakes, circling in on my metaphor,
a complicated eco-system.

And we speak of the monster cities, staggering under their own
weight, the spectacular flesh of jet planes and oil tankers
beginning to rot in the old swamps they used to gorge in.

The failure
of intelligence: they no longer
make sense

the weather changes
it is another world

Nightfall. The fog-shrouded peak of the
Bank of America.

In the real world
you leave
you go north again

you dream you are a little girl
overwhelmed with books and papers

you keep saying *I have to sort it all out.*

This. This
intelligence
that resists
the monstrous

this small
lithe
warm-blooded
animal
that survived

this sort kind kin cousin

our line

the child again

she-fate

this *long long trail*

winding

into the land

of my dreams

*

3.

The night you called me
drunk
at 2 a.m.

You said you had written a poem with these lines:

*This Roman mob
grew up out of
La Belle San Francisco
just like I did*

the city is a mob a mass “a great beast”

a mountain

a cave

a mother

maw

*

4.

What I can never do is speak to you face to face

riding beside you in the car
sitting in the restaurant
the bar

I don't know what you are to me

in the real world

*

5.

“This poem may never be finished.”
I said that to Debra yesterday.

(I am writing this in the real world
in real time
sitting at my kitchen table
a house in San Francisco

I see now I meant
the distance will never be finished
the blind distance
in time
I begin to see

*

6.

Because I can never speak

This. This

sorting out endlessly a kind of road in the dark

Crossing the country last summer I saw, somewhere in Nebraska,
that there is no space left in America; there is only distance.

We are consumed.

We are mortal.

In

Time.

divided

empty miles

*

7.

You said all this to me a long time ago (I remember it I am already
forgetting it) in another world

your nightmares
you are terrified of monsters you called them “self-aggrandizement”
“mortality”

I would not be writing this
if you did not speak to me

but we move
in the direction
of our dreams

and so

you also dream the child in whom nothing is lost

and another friend dreams I write a poem with this line:

The rock begins to bleed

and so I do
in the real world
this mystery
this complex intelligence in which nothing is finished

not this
not my own monstrous silence stone-head

broken

*

8.

In the end I say you belong to this city. And you say yes,
that's right. I had thought the city belonged to me.

a part

and then you go away

And this

speaks, listening
in this place, apart

in the real, immortal world

finished

never done

April 17-21, 1976

The Egyptian Poems (1983)

The Opening of the Mouth

The dead are our children and we must coax them to eat.
Ah Ah Ah Ah pointing to the mouth, touching
the food: the bull's leg, the heart.

The dead are our gods. We must pry open their mouths.
They cannot live without our sustenance.
We bring hammers and chisels.
We crack their throats.
Our words fly open above our heads:
stone clouds of owls, lines of water
rippling, geese.

The gods are our children. Eat.
Eat the heart, the leg, the thigh,
all the parts. Take into the darkness of your mouth
this eye. It will be enough light.
It will light you
forever.

Who are the Gods?

Who are the gods with their heads on?
Who are the gods wayfaring in their straightened bones?

They walk on the dark plain.
Their heads are shining.

See how my father's head has been restored to him.
See how his wounded mouth has been healed.

See my mother gathering in the darkness
his heart, his star
his roots and leaves.

A Hymn to Osiris

My father Osiris treeheart
My father Osiris whose backbone is the roof beam of this house
My father here and in the Other World
alone in his boat all night breathing

My father green in the morning
his boat having drawn unto the mountains of the east
his tongue rises

His name is the swollen water
the bent reed
His name is: The Eye of the Man Listening Beholds the Owl

His name flies to the remotest towns
of the Two Lands

His name becomes us
when we die

The Weighing of the Heart: A Prayer

o my mother heart I stand and wait my mouth is empty and dry
o my mother the millions of words in the balance I pray none
will lie o my heart my little heart walking in the darkness
alone I wait while the feather drops while the god listens
and weighs

Opening the Tomb to the Soul and the Shadow

I have come so far
I have made this journey
in the dark
through the rocks and dry sand
of the Other World
I walk on my own feet
my legs are intact
my backbone is upright
I see with the Eye of Horus

My shadow joins me
my double
my soul

The shadoweaters
surround me
everywhere
stealing the light
eating the sun

But a way appeared to me
and I walked in it

Of the Creation of the World

We are the gods and the children of gods.
Our mother the arch and the stars,
our father the ground, the rock,
his belly on which we stand.

For which we praise Thoth who raised her
with a word. A single command parted
the darkness of their embrace. Belly
to belly, sky to land, they had lain
forever. Nothing changed.

Thoth spoke; Shu drew her up.
Shu the vast emptiness stood between them
at last. In that place, all this:
you see, you breathe the air.

Of the Origin of the Gods: A Catechism

I am that god who
was already there in the scattered water
at the back of time before now.
I am the last one.

Who is this?

This is the god who was not a child
the first one before you
the last one behind you
the god of no face and no flesh
who nevertheless
faces you.

Explain this.

This is that god who
came to himself and knew his own name.
In that name
naming. And the great train of gods
was called out of the darkness
of his mouth.
I am that god who named his own parts
and they rose up around me
shining.

Who is this? Explain it.

Some say these are the millions of years
in which all things come to pass.

Some say the name of this god is: Island
or: Pillar

or: Gate

Others, however, say the god is
a dead body sealed up in the ground
a piece of shit at the bottom of a lake.

The name of the god is hidden.
It has already disappeared
into the darkness of shapes.

It watches; it devours
it wraps itself in the hair of animals
it hides its face in the flames of heaven.

Its mouth is the dead wind in the heat of midday
its two eyes roar with light.

This is the god in whose body I walk
in whom I stand upright
the feet and legs of the god
the moving phallus the womb
the hair shaken over the brow
the arms outstretched from star to star.

The Gates

I come to the place of locked gates.
I knock.
Three gods appear before me.
I have seen their faces in dreams.
The Watcher leans toward me
listening.
The light around him is green.
The dog-headed Keeper
pulls a knife from his belt.
I tell him I know his name.
The Messenger questions me.

To answer thus, I have remembered it all my life, to say the words
by which they will know me, again and again, when we meet in
this darkness, to utter my name, to tell them I have eaten the same
food they have eaten, that I have suffered the same pain, that I
have been split and cracked and have risen and gathered
my flesh around me again.

To tell them I have undertaken this journey from the beginning
and have not ceased to walk in this way, that my mouth is whole,
my hands are raised, that I come praising the light.

That their eyes look back at me in the instant I pronounce
these words, that I thus draw them out of the darkness
and enter into their company.

Afterword: Beverly Dahlen's *The Egyptian Poems*

by Robert Duncan

Let the reader go first directly to the text of these “Egyptian” poems to read aloud and find the cadences, seek the potential music in the phrasings, listening to hear the tone leading of vowels, the place of syllables in their word sequences, the inner harmonics, the echoes, the stops—the changing word patterns and the centers will emerge. The riming is there but it is slight—nothing must detract from the evocations, the tellings, the keeping of the presence of the gods. In the first poem, “The Opening of the Mouth,” the vowel of “coax” will echo the vowel in the word “opening”; the vowels of “dead,” “children,” “and “them” rime; as do the vowels of “we” and “eat”: but in the third line “the food,” “the bull’s leg,” “the heart” must stand each as independent as the characters within a hieroglyph. Beverly Dahlen writes in a deep and unfailing sense of the art that she has studied in the cadenced verse that Eliot and Pound, but especially William Carlos Williams and H.D. developed in their late works. Williams in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” and H.D. in *Helen in Egypt*—each preparing for death, addressing the core of their feeling—write in essential voice: *from the heart*, as our common speech calls it; but the ancient Egyptians too spoke of Thoth’s demand that the witnessing soul speak with his heart in his mouth, or with his tongue rooted in the heart. “Take into the darkness of your mouth / this eye,” the first poem in the sequence says. What do you see?

These are poems evoking, and in return belonging to, a mystery. The dead and the gods address in this mystery may once have been powers

of a religious cult, but they are now eternal persons of a poetry—a poetry drawing upon myth and history—upon what the poet has read—in part, but more importantly, upon dream. “Three gods appear before me. / I have seen their face in dreams,” she tells us in “The Gates.” In my mind—and I speak here of the realm of thought that involves the deep systems of the body “lost in thought,” that stirs at the pulse of nerve energies, that so courses in the blood in its circulations to underlie the courses of words in their circulations—over months of returning to Beverly Dahlen’s poetry, what I have to say here slowly has come into place.

Waking this morning in the dark before dawn the blood was rehearsing a kind of speech that came up or came forward as speech does in her speech in these poems that compels us as life compels—fearfully, I realized. I was coming up from the dark myself to come forward into what would be my day haunted by these poems I had asked to be allowed to “introduce,” even as, hearing them read sometime in December 1977, I asked the poet to send me a copy of her manuscript. And it has been in light of this set of Egyptian poems, the more strikingly unique that they draw as from a deep well upon the springs of Egyptian theurgy back of her reading of H.D.’s own theurgy. A theurgy? A calling up of divine powers to work in one’s life. Needs imagination, needs art, needs prayer.

Back of these Egyptian poems—they are a set, conceived as a set (and in the dream orders from the word *set* the name *Set*, the unnamed, comes forward to take his place with the named: Osiris, Thoth, Shu)—there are two earlier publications: *Out of the Third* (1974), a book of origins in “the memory of my grandmothers,” and *A Letter at Easter: To George Stanley*. The three stand as one, even as the oracular saying of Maria Prophetissa which Beverly Dahlen quotes from Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy* informs the reading of *Out of the Third*: One becomes two, two / becomes three & out / of the third comes / the one as the / fourth.

Nothing is incidental in this poetry; everything counts. The poem itself like the body of Osiris must be assembled from each of its parts entire: it is the terms of poetry like a depth analysis reading in psychology.

Go back to search the other two of these three in search of this third. The powers of the Finnish grandmother, of the language Finn rumored to be “a language / that has no root,” the powers known by ancestors of Nebraska, of Wyoming, of Michigan, of Montana, of the Great Divide, assemble in Portland, in Vancouver, as they assemble in San Francisco; but it is here in the work that they ultimately stand in the magic with the Other World powers, as with the powers of her fellowship as a poet (writing to and hearing from George Stanley in the Easter Letter), once the work of the three is done.

*

From the two preceding books I would quote passages from two poems in the context of this book.

From the poem “Black Train,” *Out of the Third*:

My backbone is a black train.
I start on the grass. It moans for me.
It will lay down and burn for me.
You will see its smoke for years and years.

and from the close of “Black Train”:

I will make a voice. It will be alone.
You will hear it all night long falling away
towards the west. It will carry you.

from *A letter at Easter*:

and then you go away
 And this
speaks, listening
in this place, apart
in the real, immortal world
 finished
 never done

*

What is the nature of this voice in poetry? It is compelling. It comes from “below”—a speech below speech; it comes from behind speech. Not from an unconscious below and behind consciousness, for this is a consciousness below and behind consciousness: that is its force. The “I” itself has undergone a change from the personal “I.” Where “I” is an other, as Rimbaud saw. The psychic life she draws in writing may be drawn from her own psychic life, but here its body is the text and it speaks to the psyche of the reader as reader. For the reader too, “I” is an other, as he or she takes identity in the text.

*

In the Summer Issue 1980 of *Feminist Studies* selections from “A Reading—an interminable work begun in June 1978” appear. The very choice of the epithet “interminable” has for me the daring and recognition of what is involved in an open form that only the serious artist (willing to follow the series through to its consequences in full recognition of its perils as well as its lures) will take as the initial proposition.

*

“We cannot refuse it,” she writes in the last passage of that selection from *A Reading*: “Freud’s prayer to Eros. There is nothing in the unconscious that corresponds to *no*.” But isn’t it just within the structures of consciousness itself that this idea has arisen? In the field of possible “yeses” and “noes,” “no noes” is in order. Even as the idea of an Unconscious is one of the higher elements in the structure of Consciousness generative as it is of fictions that can work fictions.

*

The creative field addressed, worked, and kept at work in *Out of the Third*, *A Letter at Easter*, and the present set of Egyptian poems sets into motion resonant elements in my own poetic consciousness so that I hear new harmonics. She has deepened my apprehension of the oracular voice in Poetry, and my reading now becomes so confounded with her writing that at the close of these poems with “The Gates,” even as I found myself so possessed this morning by reading

That their eyes look back at me in the instant
I pronounce these words,
that I thus draw them out of the darkness
and enter into their company.

An Interview with Beverly Dahlen

An Interview with Beverly Dahlen

C.J. Martin: I'd like to begin by returning to something you wrote while we were working on the proofs for this volume, because I think it might be a useful first statement as to the historical context of these three books. You wrote:

There are many influences that come to bear on these works: my friend Lynn Lonidier (deceased) provided my original introduction to Duncan. I gave a reading of *The Egyptian Poems* at that famous venue The Grand Piano. Lynn was there and she was a friend of Duncan's. She told me he would be interested in the poems because he read Egyptian mythology, and of course there is the link to H.D. *Helen in Egypt* was actually my source, along with *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, for the poems. They were "dictated" somehow (a la Spicer)—at least I remember being downtown and walking by Macy's when the poems began coming through. A rare experience.

But it was Eileen Callahan who finally arranged for the meeting with Duncan and it was then he agreed to write the afterword. We decided on an "afterword" because a "foreword" would perhaps have overshadowed the poems. Duncan's shadow is so bright.

I wonder if you'd say more about the relationships, conversations, affiliations, presses, venues, etc., that had your attention while writing all three of these books.

Beverly Dahlen: *Out of the Third* was written very slowly—an accumulation of poems over several years. I didn't know I was writing a book at first. I had gone back to school at San Francisco State and began working at the Poetry Center sometime in the mid-'60s. Meeting poets, listening to

readings, thinking about poetry—all this was an incentive, though I was very shy about my own work at the time. But then I studied with James Schevill and Mark Linenthal and Stan Rice. Mark and Stan had been directing the Poetry Center when I came to work there. I think the poetry workshops provided a place for discussion and thought, for learning about poets one should read.

A key figure at the time was Stephen Vincent who had been a student earlier and had come back from Nigeria where he had worked in the Peace Corps. He took over the Poetry-in-the-Schools program which had begun under the leadership of Buck Hosman as The Pegasus Program. I remember working in some of those early workshops with kids. One of my partners was Allie Light the filmmaker, who brought along all kinds of visual stimuli, objects and arrangements which she projected overhead.

Stephen was very supportive of my work. Eventually, he published a journal called *Shocks* to which I contributed, and later founded Momo's Press. I had begun assembling a manuscript which I thought was going to be the creative work I would submit for my Master's Degree, but I never did. I did not take the degree. I published the work as a book.

A Letter at Easter is of course written to George Stanley whom I met at the Poetry Center when he came back to school to study for his MA. I got to know him at the time. He moved to Canada and we had a long correspondence. I have written an essay about his poetry which is published in *The Capilano Review* in an issue which is devoted to his work (Spring 2011).

Ash Smith: Could you tell us something about the other two publishers, Effie's and Hipparchia here?

BD: I don't think I can add a lot more about Effie's and Hipparchia. Bonnie Carpenter was the artist/ publisher at Effie's. I have lost track of her completely. She made some lovely letterpress books, among them some love poems by Adrienne Rich. She decided (for whatever reasons) to sell her equipment and disappear. She turned up on my doorstep one day with a box of unsewn copies of *A Letter at Easter*. I finally gave what was left of that box to Colleen Lookingbill. I really don't know any more about Bonnie.

Eileen was married to Bob Callahan (r.i.p.) and began Hipparchia Press on her own. She and Bob had run Turtle Island for years publishing all

sorts of books--I have their boxed set of Jaime de Angulo's Indian tales, for example, and some work by Zora Neale Hurston. There were a lot of other titles as well. Eileen called her press Hipparchia after a character in one of H.D.'s novels.

CJM: It makes sense that *Helen in Egypt* would be an important context for the last book here, and that H.D. would in general occupy, even preoccupy, your reading life at the time. It seems Niedecker's there early on, too, as a kind of model, particularly in *Out of the Third*. The first issue of *HOW(ever)* (May, 1983) includes your "Notes on Reading Lorine Niedecker," (http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/archive/print_archive/niedecker.html) where Niedecker and H.D. share the same visionary orbit. For many readers, the names on *HOW(ever)*'s masthead now form a similar constellation. How might these books grow out of your engagement with that particular community of readers? Or with others?

BD: I don't remember exactly how I came to read Niedecker in the beginning. I know we had begun *HOW(ever)* and perhaps Kathleen or Frances suggested Niedecker as an author to "rediscover." I did read her work and loved it for all the reasons that are there in the little essay. Her work at the time was mostly to be found here and there, not widely available. Now of course we have the *Collected Works* edited by Jenny Penberthy (UC Press). Yes, I had been reading H.D. for some time before I read Niedecker.

To say more about the relationships: Kathleen Fraser, Frances Jaffer and I formed a reading group (mid 70's?) to study and discuss the work of neglected modernist women writers. I'm not sure how long we met to simply talk and exchange ideas. But it was Kathleen at some point who said we should start writing a newsletter of sorts to share our conversations with other women.

CJM: Can you talk about composition via dictation ("a la Spicer")? How did you come to this practice? Or would *coming-to* (becoming receptive to) be more accurate? Is it something you've returned to in *A Reading*? Do you sense a location for the channels you've tuned to? I'm thinking in particular of your having mentioned how clear it was to you, returning to these books in preparing this volume, that you were involved in a heavily autobiographical project. Do you see a relationship between composition-via-dictation and autobiography (where the stress falls on the *auto*)?

BD: Some poems are dictated. The first poem I wrote (I was in the 7th grade) was dictated. Not that I heard voices. But I was walking in my neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, and the poem came to me. I went home and wrote it down. That's all. I knew it was a real poem because it came to me like that. It wasn't something I had made up because what I made up was Hallmark card verse. Not many poems come this way. As I mentioned, *The Egyptian Poems* happened the same way. I was walking downtown as it happened next to Macy's. I had of course immersed myself in the reading of Egyptian myth, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and so on. So there was a kind of place the poems came from, they came sort of costumed as fragments of ancient Egypt.

Many poets have similar experiences. Creeley says somewhere "Is that a real poem or did you just make it up?" The idea that the poem is "given" is probably the basis for the old notion of a Muse. But then a poem is also (always?) a made thing and that's clear from the etymology itself, and is also an idea stressed by Williams and Duncan among others. It's made of language, a language that represents a silent body and the life of that body.

"Autobiography" is not a unified entity or object. A body isn't a single thing, and the mind is split and fragmented in all sorts of ways. I began reading Freud in high school and I must say his thought has been perhaps the major intellectual influence for me. My first writing workshop was taught by a professor who was also a Freudian and I learned the technique of free-associative writing. That was generative for me and it still is. Even when American feminists generally were rejecting Freud for his supposed misogyny, I did not and I was pleased to read Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* which was a defense of Freud. Of course, in France at that time there was a growing movement of feminist writers who had come under the influence of Lacan, the women we came to call the "French feminists." Their work entered the US in translation and I remember reading them, Julia Kristeva particularly, and the work became part of the on-going discussion with Kathleen and Frances. Carolyn Burke, from UC Santa Cruz, was herself translating and writing about the French women and came to our group to discuss these developments.

I digress. I wanted to say that "autobiography" and "automatic" have the same root. There is a poem in *Out of the Third* that is I think an example of automatic writing. "Right Foot" was not dictated but was an automatic

poem. It's difficult to make the distinction, but dictation is somehow more conscious. I wrote "Right Foot" in a kind of trance state and a friend wrote the words that I spoke. I don't remember much more than that. I've never tried that experiment since.

I think the idea of writing in an established form (I like the sonnet, for example) is something I should do more often. Somehow the sonnets I've written seem less autobiographical and I really do like that. There's a quote in your book from Lisa Robertson I think is apt here: "Perhaps we vacate the locus of our caring to see what language will flood into that space."

CJM: The quote from Robertson is from an interview where she discusses the "decomposed music" of *The Weather*, noting that in writing that book, she was concerned with "how sincerity was produced in language. Perhaps it was produced by displacements, as it is now. Perhaps we vacate the locus of our caring to see what language will flood into that space" (*Denver Quarterly* 42.3). I like how she frames the politics of sincerity as a formal question: "... the effect of an unmediated, sincere voice is the result of a specific history and institutionalization of style, and a rhetoric, and it works to shore up certain unproblematized ideas of identity—gendered, racialized, national, economic and so forth. I became interested in assuming this so-called sincere voice as a form of masquerade." So maybe there's something about the sonnet, say, that causes 'you' to vacate? (Maybe in a different sense of how Duncan has it: "Strict form / alarms"?)

BD: Kathleen Fraser, Susan Gevirtz and I spoke recently at a program sponsored by Small Press Traffic about the origin of the literary newsletter *HOW(ever)*. That event occurred on October 2. In preparing for the talk, I noted a small comment in *HOW(ever)* I made at the time I was writing the sonnets: it was something like being locked in a small room and going mad.

"Voice" in poetry, "sincerity"—these are notions that have been interrogated over and over—I remember a talk Michael Palmer gave years ago that questioned "sincerity." It's interesting that the quote from Robertson goes on to say she uses the mask of sincerity. It seems to me that however we go about it, there all kinds of cliché's waiting to devour us. "Sincerity" is one, "voice" is another. Here's a problem: why do we have poetry readings? Only to meet the poet and go out for drinks later? I will speak for myself here: the poem for me is voiced. It's related to my own speaking voice, but

it is also from someplace else (not Beverly Dahlen—who the hell is she?) I have to fall back here on the saying that “I is another.” The “other” of the sonnets is mad, breathless, fragmented, wounded and when I read the sonnets, that is the way they are read. It’s a performance. Public readings are always a performance with poets acting out their work, shy, or mumbling, or scared, or authoritative, strong, even tough, funny and on and on. So yes, it’s a masquerade, one assumes the mask and becomes the character, the poet and the other characters the poet has come to represent.

I like the quote from Duncan and it’s true for him, perhaps. Does it mean that he did not want to be alarmed sometimes? I don’t know the context of the quote, so I’m not sure what he’s getting at here.

JULIA DRESCHER: In *A Reading 8*, you write:

“and yet it was somehow about you, it seemed unique, though not a word was yours, it was as if you could have written it, it was truly autobiographical, no one else could have written it, it was your life.”

If we can go back a bit, do you see a relationship between the texts/projects of autobiography and the formation of the reading group that led to *HOW(ever)*? Or the move from that reading group into editing and publishing? What prompted the shift from having a reading group to editing and publishing a newsletter/journal?

Can we position dictation, automatic writing, and reading as related strategies for accessing a voice that is not your own (and therefore a “real poem”)?

BD: Yes, well this is very much related to what I wrote above. The quotation from *A Reading* recognizes the splits between language and life. One’s life is always alien to language. You don’t even have to try to make it different (make it strange) because it is there already. And we all walk around thinking the language is in us, or even is us and it isn’t, not in that way. So the sentences you’ve quoted were about some work I’d been reading, a Jane Austen novel, but I can’t remember for sure. Was it Jane Austen? Yes. I just got up and checked. It’s there, quoted, the opening words of *Mansfield Park*. And I magically took it on as my own, not only my own life, but my own writing. Now that I see it again I realize it’s a tribute to Austen whose work I love, but I see going down the page it quickly becomes a sort of psychoanalytic fantasy.

It's a timely question about *HOW(ever)* because the recent meeting is so clearly in mind. This is how it happened: Kathleen, Frances Jaffer and I had been meeting to read and discuss each other's work. Kathleen was already an established poet, but Frances had just returned to writing after a long hiatus. I was writing the poems that were published in *Out of the Third*. Other poets visited the group from time to time, so there was always a variety of work. We all identified more or less with feminism, but we began to see there weren't at that time many publications devoted to women's work. And then we began to realize that we hadn't much idea of the writing of women in the modernist period—much of that work had been eclipsed. H.D, for example, was barely in print. Who knew about Niedecker then? Dorothy Richardson? Virginia Woolf? So we began to turn our writing group into a reading group. And then sometime in the early '80s, Kathleen suggested publishing the newsletter. That was the beginning of *HOW(ever)*.

It was a quest. First of all, we all went hunting for the poets in various libraries. We turned our attention to them. And it is important to note we were not the only ones. Women all over the country, women scholars, poets, novelists were discovering one another's work. And this new interest spurred the republication of H.D. and others.

CJM: When you say, "It's there, quoted, the opening words of *Mansfield Park*," you mean that the text from *A Reading* was your annotation to the opening lines of *MP*, right?

BD: To clarify: On page 39 of *A Reading 8–10* the first paragraph of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is quoted. What follows that is not so much my annotation but a sort of free association, a fantasy of autobiography, and then a sort of leap to a full scale psychoanalytic note. That last section on the page refers to the mad Dr. Schreber and his hallucinations. He was a patient of Freud's. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Paul_Schreber

AS: You've stated above, and elsewhere, that I is an Other—conjuring the unknowability & fragmentation of the self. Yet also, these early books are (as are later books in *A Reading*) marked by loss. I'm thinking specifically here of the death of Darlene Tower in *Out of The Third*, but also the prominence of death in *The Egyptian Poems* and *A Letter at Easter: to George Stanley*—that while one's own self is inescapably multiplicitous, the death of another marks a singular loss. I wonder if you could say something about how death, or

mortality, structures these three books, if you feel it does.

Also, do you feel that questions regarding mortality, or erasure, came into your work differently as a woman at that time—that is, for instance, if the *Egyptian Poems* are infused by a channeling of H.D., how conscious were you (are you) of that work ritualistically carrying her voice? How might this relate to the female lineages and relationships that structure and arise in *Out of The Third*?

BD: The “I is another” is quoted from Rimbaud of course. I take it that he’s speaking about a sort of doubling of consciousness, a sense of one watching (voyant) oneself. What this involves is memory, dreams, all aspects of what Freud would later call the “unconscious.” There is an unconscious within consciousness—a “something” other to what we think of as “self”—the ego. Lacan made much of this “other” and “Other.” Without going into that, I’d say that I think there’s an example from Creeley I like very much:

“Whenever I speak
I speaks...”

There is the “other” speaking in “my” place. A “displacement.” As for loss, how well we know that language is a “replacement.” It covers the loss. In some ways, one does speak/write from the place of the dead, or loss. Loss happens to us very early in life. People disappear, and the child has to deal with what had been an undifferentiated space. One of the Egyptian poems is about this, the one in which the god Thoth commands an end to the infinite embrace of “mother” and “father” and Shu draws the female into the sky and the male becomes earth. It is the creation of space, the creation of the world. Certainly with *The Egyptian Poems* I was writing from the place of the dead—since these poems are based on *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. They are actually based more on that than H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, though the reading of H.D. was instrumental, and I probably wouldn’t have thought of writing my own Egyptian poems unless I’d first read H.D. There is a kind of dreaminess in H.D.’s work, a kind of twilit underground there as in my own poems.

I don’t know that I could say more about the poem on the death of Darlene Tower. She was a friend from earliest childhood and I expected to spend my life with her *in* my life. She was an intellectual, the first I knew. She taught me about Shakespeare, among other things, she had a wicked sense of humor, and a very large curiosity about sexuality. Not only that, she had

a strange feeling for the uncanny, which was sometimes frightening. She left for New York right out of high school. She failed at the one thing she really desired: to be a professional ballet dancer.

CJM: To go back a bit, I'm wondering if it might be useful to frame reading—the act of it, which involves vocation (annotation, response, community) as much as vacation (in the sense of the Robertson quote)—as preparatory to dictation. Something in Julia's question and your response reminded me of Spicer's *Beowulf* translations from the last round of the CUNY Lost & Found series. The editors of those volumes frame the translation as a sort of dictation-training for Spicer, as a vital apprenticeship to dead language/words, practice at giving that language the floor, as it were. So, reading as a preparative for a kind of evacuation (a la *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*).

Can you say more about *The Book of the Dead*? What was your experience with that reading? Do you remember how it landed on your itinerary? Did you ever attempt a translation? Or spend any time with the untranslated texts?

The Duncan quote (from my last couple of questions above) is from one of the poems in *Passages (GWII: In the Dark, 77)*. I'm taking it a bit out of context above. The full sentence (at least how he reads it) is “WITH IN / strict form / alarms / bound to” (ie he reads “with in”—which is typeset as a title to the poem—as attached to the phrase that follows). So I think yes, it's actually a pro-form/pro-alarm sentiment. Or at least a view of alarm as necessary, & necessarily “with in” and in excess of strict form.

Speaking of alarm: I love that “Right Foot” was an automatic poem. There's lots of splitting there, too, right? The foot that's someone else's foot, the 100 birds “still” in the yard (as if about to start or how many gone already?), and of course the ending is totally splitsville (“why / stick around for that? // so”). Above all, the writing's split—a trance state, a typist. You said you read the sonnets in a “mad, breathless, fragmented, wounded” voice—I wonder, how do you read “Right Foot”? Are there other poems in these first three books that demand a particular type of performance?

BD: Yes, I've read the Spicer *Beowulf* and I see that it's possible to interpret his translation as a preparation for dictation. But I wouldn't bet on it. Spicer seems to be more interested in finding the right word, the—he seems to be interested in finding the word's aura—something I associate more with Duncan. But he is also a student at the time, this is student work and

he defers often to authority. So I'm not sure. Translation is perhaps always a little like dictation insofar as you have to "channel" in a way the original sense of the text.

I can't remember exactly how I came to the *Book of the Dead*. There was the idea that The Grateful Dead named themselves from a phrase there, and there were translations in the Rothenberg anthology *Technicians of the Sacred* from Egyptian texts. I can't put everything in a proper time frame, but there had also been the first King Tut show which made a big impression on US culture at the time. Everything was coming up Egyptian. And finally there was the reading of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*. I haven't made any sort of serious study of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* but it entered my consciousness at some level and provoked the poems I wrote. There were many influences, probably even more than I can recall.

If I've ever given a reading of "Right Foot" I can't recall how I read it. But yes, a reading would for me be a "performance" and I would be bound to imitate the original trance state and read it from there. As I think I said, it was literally dictated in that a friend was writing down the words as I spoke them.

I think there is an underlying anxiety in the poem about my lack of clear "handedness." I think I'm left-handed, or was, but then was "switched" at school. They used to do that. I still hesitate when giving directions, have to think about it, and I'm lost sometimes. Spatial organization is a problem.

AS: Could you say something regarding the reception of each of these first three books? How did each book change your perception of yourself as a writer?

BD: How did publication change my life? I had published in a few small journals before the first book came out. I had given at least one reading, maybe more. When *Out of the Third* was published, I remember being very excited, walking in North Beach, telling people about my book. But it really wasn't such a big deal. EVERYBODY in San Francisco had a new book, or a book coming out, or a second book and so on. It's just a little difficult to get noticed. I didn't really even have a formal book launch.

Things were different after that. *A Letter at Easter* was given a real sendoff at Intersection. And *The Egyptian Poems* were recognized by Duncan, so that was all right. Somewhere WCW exclaims "I AM a poet! I AM a poet!"

and I think that must come with publication. You send your work out. And whatever happens after that, you at least know you have that identity. It's a partial identity of course, but something others have to account for.

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