

DISPATCHES FROM THE BODY POLITIC

interviews by **TONY TRIGILIO**

featuring **JAN BEATTY**
MEG DAY &
DOUGLAS KEARNEY

with an afterword by **CM BURROUGHS**



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ESSAY PRESS LT SERIES

In the Essay Press Listening Tour series, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics, and artists, we hope to further envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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INTRODUCTION

—TONY TRIGILIO

Asked how her move from Northern California to Utah affected her work, Meg Day explains, “I’m landlocked for the first time ever in my life, and, you know, that put me in a position to sort of have to reimagine what it was to be *this* body in *this* place.” Like Day, Jan Beatty and Douglas Kearney return frequently in their interviews to what it means “to be *this* body in *this* place.” For each of these poets, the body is a point of investigative departure; it is an arena that politically charged language acts itself upon, and a space from which a language for social change can emerge. The body becomes a generative intersection of politics and craft in Beatty’s remarks about taboo and privilege, Day’s discussion of how John Donne’s “three-person’d god” becomes a twenty-first-century “transgender’d god,” and Kearney’s construction of a poetics of resistance to the U.S. history of pathologizing the black body.

At first glance, it may not seem unusual in the twenty-first century for artists to talk about how the body resides at a nexus of class, gender, race, and sexuality. But crucially for Beatty, Day, and Kearney, the body also is a matter of poetics—a question of craft, not just a thematic locus for their poems. The cultural work of a poem can too easily overshadow the subtleties of craft in contemporary critical discourse, privileging the sociological dimensions of what a poem says at the expense of the aesthetic strategies deployed by the poet who brought the poem into being. These interviews with Beatty, Day, and Kearney begin with the assumption that the social and aesthetic dimensions of the poem are of equal importance in the production and reception of the work—and they affirm, in different ways for each poet, that we do a disservice to both politics and craft if we disengage those dimensions from each other.

This chapbook consists of transcripts from the poetry podcast Radio Free Albion, which I’ve hosted since 2012. The interviews take place long-distance, via Skype. I call each poet from my apartment, surrounded by laptop, microphone, and mixer—my window facing the brick wall of the building next door—and, as we talk, I try to replicate the informal conversational environment of a cafe or bar so that the

poets can chat freely and openly about their work. My hope is that the interviews create the kind of spontaneous insight we can't always find in the formal seminar-style discourse of the four walls of the classroom. I'm grateful for how academic environments nurture and sustain poetry in an increasingly instrumentalist culture: Beatty, Day, Kearney, and myself, for instance, all make a living in academia. But my hope is that these interviews produce seminar-worthy knowledge through an organic give-and-take between two poets who are simply excited to talk in a digitally mediated, non-academic space about how their words live and breathe in the physical world. Radio Free Albion began as a response to a publishing landscape with limited venues for discovering new books of contemporary poetry. It has become, for me, the digital equivalent of Frank O'Hara's intimate analog telephone from his "Personism" manifesto: "I realized that if I wanted to," O'Hara famously wrote, "I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born." My hope is that the new-media "Personism" of Radio Free Albion brings new readers to the poets I interview, and, in doing so, inspires new poems—future dispatches from the body politic—in all of us who take part in the interviews and listen to them.

DISPATCHES FROM THE BODY POLITIC

interview with JAN BEATTY

Tony Trigilio: I know you've been on the road a lot lately doing readings for *The Switching/Yard*. Can you talk about where you've been reading or what some of the experiences have been like reading from the book?

Jan Beatty: Just a couple days ago I was in Johnstown—University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown—a really great community out there. Michael Cox, the fiction writer, invited me, and I was in New Jersey a couple weeks ago at Monmouth University with the great writers Michael Waters and Mihaela Moscaliuc. Michael Thomas invited me there. There's great sense of community when I get to go to these places because I usually know some people there. This coming week, I'm going to read at Housing Works in New York City with David Groff, and Michael Waters again. I'm really looking forward to that. And then I'm going straight from there to New Jersey, to Paterson, to do a

workshop for Maria Gillan at the Passaic Poetry Center. I've been doing it a lot, and one of the challenges is to balance my classes, and teaching, and directing the writing program at Carlow University. But it's gone pretty well.

TT: That is a challenge. I know it can be a struggle sometimes. You've got to make sure your students are on track when you're not there. When I'm leaving for travel like that, to do readings, I don't want my students to lose the groove that we were in. It's a real challenge to recapture that groove.

JB: I talk to them about it and tell them where I'm reading, and I talk about being a working writer and that the people who you want to study with wherever you go in an MFA program—you want to study with working writers who are doing these things, who are reading themselves, who are learning and growing. That's one part of it. Another part is that it also broadens community. I mean there might be a blip or a sense of continuity that's missed when you're away at a reading, but then on the other side of that I have some people who are helping me teach my classes, and so the students get to hear a number of different voices. I think that's always good.

TT: I know what you mean about that—it also gives the students a sense of what it means to be a teaching writer. Like when I come back from doing a reading (or actually before, too), I like to talk to my students about, as you said, where I'm going, how I'm prepping for the reading. Just to be an artistic role model for them: like, "Eventually, you are all going to be in this place, and you'll have to think about these things, too." And, as I add sometimes, "You'll be petrified five minutes before you go on stage, too."

JB: Exactly.

TT: In "Visitation at Gogama," the opening poem of *The Switching/Yard*, you write, "I tell you this is my family tree—no / noble phrases, no graveyards on the hill, / just visitations." I'm wondering what you would like readers to know about the book's context and background. What would you like readers to know about the "visitations" that led you to write the poems in the book?

JB: I thought about that a lot. I, of course, want the poems to stand by themselves without any background information. But when I have been reading from this book in particular, I've been telling some stories relating to my life. I'm very clear that poetry is not autobiography, and

even though there are poems in this book about my birth father, you know, they're still not all true and the poem is what rules everything. I'm going to make the best poem I can make and try to serve the truth of feeling in the poem rather than the "truth," whatever that is, you know. So, I do try to give some kind of context when I'm reading from this book, more so than I would usually do. There are railroad tracks on the cover of this book and it's called *The Switching Yard* and it's about switching babies and switching railroad tracks, literally, and switching genders.

TT: With the kind of poems you are writing, I think it would be easy for a reader to assume every single speaker in this poem, and every single speaker in every poem, is Jan, and everything that is happening in the poem has happened to her. And as you say, you want the truth of the feeling to be prominent rather than every poem having to be true to what actually happened, if *anything* happened sometimes. This gets me thinking about something I really appreciate in your poems: even though we know poetry doesn't always have to be and isn't always autobiographical, the personae in your poems, the people in your poems, are so real that the poems can sometimes feel autobiographical. You're not afraid of being vulnerable. You're not evasive in

the poems, and the public and the private seem to merge a lot. I'm assuming that can be uncomfortable sometimes—to be so personal in the poems—and I'm wondering if you can talk about some of your strategies for balancing the public and private. Where does the personal poem get unsettling for you? Where is it really energizing, too?

JB: I think I accepted a while ago that readers, listeners (depending on how much poetry they've read or how they embrace poetry), are going to decide what they want about the work and about me, and I'm fine with that. I'm not worried about how they're going to decide about me. If they decide this whole book is autographical, I mean they would be wrong, but that's that. I used to be so intense, especially with some of the adoption poems that I was writing. I really wanted to get it across—like what I was doing, and that this was a composite often of things that had happened, or a bunch of lies at times, and then, you know, I sort of...I just gave up on it, because I feel like I'm always trying to write the best poem I can write and just serving the poem and letting everything fall where it falls. Because of that, I think I'm willing—I hope I'm willing—to go anywhere in a poem regardless of how personal for the speaker in the poem. And I consciously try to

break down boundaries. For example, I just did a workshop in Johnstown called "Ongoing Censorship in the Life of a Writer," and I was talking about how no matter how long we've been writing, there is this self-censorship that is always there, and I'm always writing trying to break that down, and I can see it moving through my books. I'm just a big proponent of breaking down that self-censorship because there is so much withholding around what we don't say that has so much energy, and so much power, and I'd just like to get to that place.

TT: Self-censorship, I think, might really be at the core of the question I was asking, and I want to say just a little more about that. When I'm asking fellow poets on the show to talk about the deep roots of their poetics, it can sometimes be uncomfortable: like, "I don't want you to reveal the mystery that we need to compose—the mystery that needs to be there." When I feel I've asked a question like that, I try to recover by imagining how I would answer the question. For me, as you were talking about self-censorship, I thought that's really the bull's eye of the question for me. When the editor who lives inside my head is really getting uneasy, and is trying to get me to stop writing—"Don't go there,

you're going too far"—that's really when I need to push the hardest. And it sounds like that is what you are saying too: you want to push that boundary of that person in you who says, "Enough."

JB: Oh, exactly. But even more than that, to locate it. I mean, in my first book, *Mad River*, I have a poem called "Sucking." It's the first poem I wrote that had any sexuality, and it came from when I was at the Squaw Valley Writing Workshop in California many years ago. We had to write a poem every day and bring it in and show it to everybody, and I was working with Sharon Olds, Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Galway Kinnell, and so it was kind of challenging and frightening. Because of the nature of bringing a new poem every day. I hit upon some voice in my head that said, "Oh, no, you can't write about that," and then I realized for the first time that I had been censoring anything regarding sexuality, which was shocking to me because I thought I was very brave and open. Ever since then I'm sure there are other things that I am censoring that I don't even know about. That's why I keep going back and going back and just trying to break open whatever I run into because I don't know what's in there—and it's so rare, I think, that we talk at length about real things and where people really get naked with their feelings and get down

to it. And you know I remember growing up and feeling like, “When do I get to speak? When is my turn, and when do I get to really say it—and I mean really say it?” So I made a decision years ago (I mean it wasn’t easy, and it continues to be challenging) that this is my life, and I tell this to my students: this is my life, my time on planet earth, and I’m going to try to say everything I need to say while I’m here, and I feel lucky enough to be able to do that. And I mean that’s the way I look at it. I’m going to write it down.

TT: This is your time and your chance to talk at length, as you said, about real things. I think it’s really important for our students to see us doing that, to see that kind of vulnerability, because I think our students are facing the same kind of externally imposed limitations that we had to deal with. As you said, “When do I get to say what I really want to say?” And when I saw my professors doing that in their poems, I thought, *My god, maybe I can do that, too.*

JB: For me, it was really the women writers (I mean Sharon Olds, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich) that saved me at the beginning and I just thought, *Wow, they said these things at a time when it was much harder for women to get books published and, however they did that, you*

know, thank god they did. So whenever I start to chicken out or say, “Oh, I can’t say this,” I think about them and I think, *You know, people before me did—and did it with a vengeance.*

TT: They’re the archetypes for not chickening out. Absolutely. Let’s hear a poem from the book.

JB: OK, since you mentioned the visitation poem, I think I’ll read that. And just to give it some kind of context, I was trying to write these poems about my birth father, and I had met him one time, so it was really hard to access anything about him because I didn’t know him. I did find that he was a professional hockey player from Canada. He played for three teams: the Pittsburgh Hornets, New York Rangers, Toronto Maple Leafs. And he won three Stanley Cups. He had the most post-season penalties in the NHL, which started making sense with my personality. I tended to get into a lot of fights with people, and I was an athlete when I was younger. So anyway, I thought I would take a train across Canada. I went from Toronto to Jasper, stopping in Winnipeg because that’s where he was born. And I was looking for him not physically but psychically, and when I got on the train a lot of things started to happen and this is, this is one of those things.

Visitation at Gogama

No shirt, was drying his long hair
with a towel and staring at the train,
he looked about 30.

I saw my birth father young and alive,
he stepped out of a brown house with a white
sign on the side: wild bill (his nickname)
in big block letters. I saw him the way he was
before he made me—
beautiful and astonishing in his maleness.

I tell you this is my family tree—no
noble phrases, no graveyards on the hill,
just visitations. Now pieces of discarded track,
explosion of purple wildflowers along the side,
solid wall of rock 5 ft from the train,
then a river/bridge/floating leaves
that look like giant lily pads—is that possible?
We’re approaching the town of Gogama,
Ontario—small railroad town erased
by the diesel engine. There’s a bar called
“Restaurant/Tavern” and a meat market
called “Meat Market” and a motel called
“Motel”—no other names.

In this place of no-naming or maybe
first-naming, I decide I’ll call myself “bastard”—
it’s plain and accurate, you can count on it.
We approach a signal, a woman in a
black tank top with killer arms slouches
in a grey Buick Century at the crossing
in a modified gangster lean. I decide
I love her, call her free.

TT: That’s a great poem—it feels like a perfect
opener for the book. And I know it’s very hard

to find that opening poem, to know that this has to be the one that opens the book. I'm thinking about how this poem sets the scene for the book with its sense of intense movement: the psyche's moving rapidly, or the poet, the persona, is in a moving car or moving trains. There is a sense of restlessness and sort of a tension between rootlessness and rootedness in the book. Can you talk a little bit about the role of restlessness in the book?

JB: It's more like the restlessness in me. It's a pretty defining part of me, and I've always, you know, wherever I am, I just want to go. I just want to go somewhere. I want to leave town. That's just a primary feeling for me. I live in Pittsburgh, I love Pittsburgh, and I was born here even though I've left here so many times. But I'm here. I look at it as a great home base from which to depart. I just go a lot. But I think one thing the book personifies is this feeling of movement through long lines. It's a very different book for me. There's some longer poems, long lines, and I think it was because of the trains. Because I wrote a lot of these poems literally on the train and I was just writing down notes—everything I saw. I remember when I was revising and editing the poems, my friend Judith Vollmer, who is a great poet (her new book, *The Water Books*, is just terrific, and she's one of my readers and I'm a

reader for her), said, "You know, there are no verbs in these poems." I just kept writing down concrete details and they became long lines as the trains were moving. And then my editor Ed Ochester for the University of Pittsburgh Press, a great poet himself and great editor, said that my poem "Leaving Denver Union Station" was boring. I thought it was really interesting because it had all these names of places I saw—and he said nobody really cares about this. I really cut the poem in half (it was two-and-a-half pages). I really had to go back and revise a lot of these poems in certain ways because of the movement. You're picking up on something that is really key to the book.

TT: I just want to emphasize something that you were saying about how the technical aspects of the poems, like the trajectory of the lines, are affected by where you are when you are writing the poems. Like you said, the long lines come out of the train movement. I think it's fascinating to think about how where you are affects the form and the voice of the poems. Before you read "Visitation at Gogama," we were talking about censorship, self-censorship, and, you know, wanting to talk at length about real things. And I want to go back to something that is related to those questions: the role of taboo in your work. Not just the role, but the *allure* of

taboo. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of taboo in your work? And it can be anything—it can be the taboos about sex, sexuality, and gender, but those aren't the only taboos, I think, that are at work in your poems.

JB: I might ask you a question about that, too. But I guess I don't think of it in terms of taboo—or sexuality or issues of class probably for me feel the most taboo, but I don't think of it that way. I guess I just hit it from the other angle of just really going inside myself and trying to write what's the hardest thing for me. And if I run into a wall breaking that down—that's really what I do. And when I'm putting the book out, I'm so used to people mistaking some of what I do for, you know, playing with taboos, because I don't even think of it that way. I mean that's where I lived. I swear a lot in my life and I just swear all the time, but I don't see that as an issue. I feel like it's just language. I mean Lenny Bruce is one of my heroes. I realize the word "free" happens a lot in this book, and I didn't realize that until I started reading, had been reading, it. The book is very intense. It sounds adolescent, but it's about no one telling me what to do or what to say ever. But that's just a given. So I'm not going to hold back. The poem's going to make me pull back

on it. If it's making a bad poem, then I'll take it out. Otherwise, no.

TT: When I was thinking about the questions that I wanted to ask about your work and about the book, I kept coming back to taboo, and then I thought "taboo" might be too easy of a word because a taboo is so context-dependent. What's a taboo? I remembered my mother telling me once I couldn't say the word "bastard" because I would get arrested if I said it. So then I just said "Bastard, bastard, bastard, bastard." I think some of my hesitation about the question is what you are zeroing in on. It's not about taboo for you; it's just about writing what you have to write, and going to places that aren't always easy to go to, and for some people are going to be taboo, but not necessarily for you.

JB: Right. I mean, I run into those people at readings. Some people get angry with me. *Red Sugar*, for example, I think was the first time I used the word "cunt." And I thought about it a lot. I mean because I'm a really strong feminist and, after I had written the poem, I was thinking: *I would hate to have someone who was a feminist thinking I wasn't being a feminist.* But then I had to let that go, too, because I knew why I was using it in the poem, and it's all about context. And there's plenty of strong language in this book also, but

it's like I tell my students, you have to really ask yourself why you're using what words. And it has to be the right word for the poem—and shock value is intensely boring and it has nothing to do with that. But when you go back and revise, you certainly have to ask, does this poem earn the usage of these words or this content?

TT: When I asked you about taboo, you said you had a question for me, and I think I took us away from that, but do you remember what the question was?

JB: Well, I guess I think you answered it a little. I was going to ask you why you thought any of this was taboo. Or I guess I don't consider the language taboo, although I guess it depends on who you are talking to, which is kind of ironic because I host a radio show on WESA FM and I have to abide by FCC regulations. I have to tell people not to say certain words. I don't want to be hypocritical here, but certainly there are certain situations where you can't say certain words, which I hate. But I guess I'm wondering why you are using the word "taboo."

TT: That actually leads me to something I want to ask about class. As you were asking me the question, I was thinking about *Court Green*, the journal that I co-edit. For the tens of trillions of people

that listen to this podcast across twelve galaxies, we have published Jan a lot in *Court Green* and...

JB: Thank you!

TT: With our pleasure! Every issue you've been in has been better because of your poems. When people ask me, "How do you know a poem is 'a *Court Green* poem,'" I say we like to rustle around in taboo, but I'm never completely satisfied with that answer. To me, it's not always "taboo" to rustle around in a world where we say things we're not supposed to say, where we can't help but go in and out of gender roles, and where sexuality is fluid. I'm fluid, and that's not taboo to me. Well, to my family it is—that's one place where it is sort of context-dependent. What is "taboo" from one frame-of-reference is just everyday lived experience for someone else. One other taboo I want to ask about is class. I guess this is an intensely personal moment for me. I really appreciate the way you write about economic class—about what it's like to be living in a world where you don't have a lot of money. Having grown up poor, I've always felt it's a taboo in poetry to talk about class. I mean, there are role models, of course. Philip Levine's poetry in graduate school made me think: *Oh, my god, there are people out there who*

lived at one time like I did. But a poem like "Company Car" in *The Switching/Yard* really knocks me out because you are dramatizing for readers that the inner lives of those of us who aren't born into money can be really radiant and complicated and important. And I wish that wasn't a taboo. But, in poetry, it still feels like a taboo to me.

JB: It really is a taboo. All you have to do is look at the other poetry journals, like *Poetry* or something, or go to Iowa for graduate school. I started out at the University of Iowa, which was my dream, and I really ran into privilege there, big time. I was in Marvin Bell's class, and he was fine, but all the other students were talking about when they *lived* in Europe, not when they *visited* Europe. And I got angry in the first class and was acting out. I was like, "I don't think I can stay here because I don't think I'll be able to write the kind of poems I want to write—I think it's going to hurt my poems." And I left after six weeks. That was a big learning experience for me because I knew if I stayed at Iowa, I would get that credential, which means something in Poetryland in terms of publication and prizes and all that stuff. But I was like, "No, I gotta get out of here." And, you know, I never regretted

that for a second. Maybe I could read "Company Car."

TT: Let's do it, let's hear "Company Car." That sounds great.

JB: I appreciate what you are saying about it, and you can probably relate to this. Even when I'm reading some class poems, I can feel those old feelings of, oh, you know: *You're not good enough.... Oh, should I read this here?* That shit all comes up. And a lot of it, you know, I talk about my father, whom I love. My adoptive father was a steel worker and he was a fighter also, and he punched his foreman out at US Steel, at the mill. Then he got a job with American Tobacco and that's when we got the company car.

Company Car

To make sure, they took out the back seat,
left a dirty hole for hauling supplies.
My father worked for American Tobacco, when
smoking was glamorous & profits fatter.
We set up little red & white folding chairs
in the back hole of the Ford Fairlane sedan,
1960 black with red vinyl interior, me & my
sister, 7 years before Woodstock, we
rock/n rolled crazy down the street.
I was 10 & didn't know the history
of the company store. Laughing & falling over
/my father's eyes in the rear-view/my
mother scowling, I didn't know the shame of it.
Our screams of stupid joy reminded them
of what we were: working-class, afraid of
being seen riding around, afraid my father
would lose his job. He couldn't take us
to school or church, but he did.
He was the builder of our lives, carving
a way through the lies around us.
Is that why he yelled so much at our silliness?
Where did he put his rage, as he pulled the black
car into the garage & turned the key?
I saw him late one night under the side-house light:
he took it & put it stone by stone in the
driveway wall, heaving & radiant. I saw him
give rage a body, breathe it alive.

TT: I want to talk about Pittsburgh in a second, but I want to just say one more thing about our conversation about class and hearing "Company Car" again. I never know who is seriously listening to the podcast. I see the download figures and I really like those numbers, but I don't always know the people behind them. And for anybody who is listening who can relate to what Jan and I were saying about being working class and being poor: in this poem, there is a sense of warmth and familial love and intelligence and radiance and strength in the kinds of lives that too often are on the margin in contemporary poetry—and it's just great to see that in a poem.

JB: Oh, thank you. You know I just did a reading at the Poem Palace in Pittsburgh, which was part of the steel mill and where the Pinkertons killed all the steel workers right on the river there, and it's a great place in memoriam and sponsored by the Homestead Foundation. It's hard to explain, but I was reading all my work poems there and, when I go in there, I feel like I can totally be myself, my work, and it just feels like home. I mean I was honored to read there but I just feel so connected there. It just feels like they know what I'm talking about here, so I appreciate that you do, and any of the listeners that do, too.

TT: In those contexts it feels like you're home, and it makes me think about a question I wanted to ask about Pittsburgh and about *place*, since place is so important to all artists and especially, I think, to poets. You're a poet of Pittsburgh, but not just as a city you happen to be in and been born in. Jan's worked really hard to build and sustain the poetry community in the city, and for those of you who don't know: Pittsburgh is one of the tightest poetry communities I've seen, where people really nurture each other to take risks. I'm wondering if you could say a little about what it means to balance those two parts of your lives, the poet and the community leader in poetry—the "community organizer" in poetry, if that is the right phrase.

JB: I think it's just something that I do because it feeds me and it just feeds poetry. It is a great, great city to be in for poetry, and when I was first starting out, I was definitely not coming from the academy. I mean, I did get a degree. I got a degree in social work and didn't do that very well and became a waitress for 15 years and that's when I plugged into the poetry community of Pittsburgh. They really welcomed me, you know, very much, organizations like the Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange and Michael Wurster, especially, back then. I started taking one

class at a time at night at the University of Pittsburgh, and then it was people in the community who helped me get my first chapbook and taught me about all that. It was always a big priority to me to combine community with university because of all these class issues. Like I wanted them to come together because they were together in me, and I felt there were things in each that I felt like everybody needed. That's what I try to do. For example, you know I direct the writing program at Carlow, but I also direct the Madwomen in the Attic, which is an amazing program that was made popular by Patricia Dobler, who was my teacher at one time and just a great poet. It's women ages 20 to 91, and we don't turn anyone away. And it's poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—we have nine sections of people and also we have undergraduates. It's a great model for that mixing to happen. And then the Madwomen do readings in the community and then some of the Madwomen go on to get their MFAs and it's kind of a great model for that. It's just all positive. There's no way to lose with it. Building that community and, you know...it's because I got so much help along the way from people, and it's just exciting to see people on their way to doing things.

TT: And as you say there is no way to lose in that if people are coming together and

supporting each other, and that support helps make new poems and new and better poems.

JB: That's right.

TT: I always ask poets I'm interviewing on the show to prepare two poems to read, and you've read a couple poems. But I'm wondering if we could close by hearing a third poem.

JB: Oh, sure. You know we've been talking about fathers, so I'll read this birth-mother poem. There are plenty of different kinds of poems in this book. It's not all just family stuff, but there is a big, you know, strain of adoption poems in here. I met my birth mother three times. The first time I met her was at Catholic Social Services and it was years ago. I didn't learn my name, my real name, until I was in my late thirties. Back then I had two dresses—I used to wear dresses—a red one and blue one. I wore the red one to this meeting, and my birth mother had on the blue one, which was just kind of shocking. This is called "My Mother Was a Dress."

My Mother Was a Dress

For years I was wearing her,
she was cotton, her neck a blue V
for her blue vagina that birthed 6 babies.
She had a vanilla string around
her waist even though she was hooker-red
at heart, like me.

I wore her for two years, along with
a sister dress of deep cherry.
When I went to meet her the first time
at Catholic Social Services, I wore the cherry
and she wore the blue vagina.

We thought that genetics had made us
go to Joseph P. Hornes to buy the V,
but decided we both lived
near the bloodless dept. store.
After that, I took her off,
stopped wearing her,
didn't want her touching
my body anymore.

I prefer to think it's all animal—
the way the V opens my neck to predators,
the way she scissored her legs open
to my father's cock.
The way the dress hugs my hips
then falls,
just like she said she hugged me once—
before falling away, switching
me out for sale.

interview with MEG DAY

Tony Trigilio: I'm really excited to talk about your new book, *Last Psalm at Sea Level*. One of the many things I appreciate in this book is how you write political poems that are absolutely engaged with social conflict while also deeply invested in the craft of the poem. As someone who loves to read and write what we call "political poems," I know how satisfying that is, but also hard that is, to balance. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you see, or how you experience, the intersection of politics and art.

Meg Day: Sure. Sure. And thank you for the comments about my work. I think that very recently I realized that I have been writing what I guess are political poems for the better part of a decade and had no idea that that was what I was doing. I think that's sort of a testament to the way I think about politics and poetics. I ask my students a lot to consider what the

responsibility of a poet is, and I think that folks are particularly resistant to that question because they don't want to think of poetry as a political act. For me, the two are inseparable. I don't think that there is anything but politics in the decision to sit down and write a poem, especially given the current political climate and everything going on in the world right now. Especially in terms of socioeconomics—to sit down and write a poem, it's like, "What are you doing?" And so I do think they are very deeply intertwined for me, and they always have been. I don't know how to separate that from my experience in the world as a queer kid, as a kid who is hard-of-hearing, as someone who had a great level of satisfaction in being brought up in a political climate. You know, I went to Mills College in Oakland for my MFA and just got schooled really, really hard on race politics, on gender politics, and I'm so, so grateful for that education. But it goes hand in hand with creative output. So all of that is, I guess, to say that they are inseparable for me and I think that very, very few poems escape the grasp of politics and some just do politics much more covertly.

TT: And, like you said, the act of sitting down to write a poem (the act of sitting down to work what's happening into

language) takes place in a context. Especially right now, in a context of international wars everywhere, domestic wars everywhere, people turning on each other in the U.S. and across the world. Just to make a decision to work—to make art—is to make a decision that takes place in a socioeconomic context. We can't divorce ourselves from that.

MD: And especially because of the way that poets are regarded in this country. We witness in other countries the reverence or the fear that is directed toward poets as archivists, poets as political activists, folks that are perhaps in a position to portray fearlessness in the face of great danger. Very literal, physical, bodily, corporal danger. And I think that, at least currently, in the U.S. we don't really have that kind of bodily risk to the censorship that's put forth by the government. So I do think it's a really, really interesting time to be a poet, and it's a really interesting time to look around and see how politics are affecting poets in other places.

TT: When you were talking about politics, I was thinking of how the poet—how the figure of the poet—conducts himself or herself in other countries, and how they're treated in other countries. I'm thinking of a former colleague of mine, a poet whose work I love, Maureen Seaton. When she

taught with me at Columbia College, she would have this prompt she would do with her students, and if I remember it correctly, it was simply: "Write a poem that is going to change the world." And, Maureen, if you're listening, I have stolen this from you at times, and I've gotten the same reactions from my students: this moment where they look at me like, "No, that doesn't happen. You can't do a poem like that." And I'm like, "What happens if you try?" And then it gets us into that space like you're talking about, that space that says, "Well, what does it mean to write a poem in the U.S. that is at least trying to do something like that?" So thank you for bringing Maureen to my head, and I really hope you are listening, Maureen. I team-taught the class with her once and stole a lot of great stuff from her. But I'll stop talking about stealing from you, Maureen. Sort of keeping with the idea of the poet—it's something that I agree with, too, what you were saying, that it's almost impossible to *not* be engaged. I think it *is* impossible to not be engaged with our social and cultural environment. In your book, gender fluidity and LGBT civil rights are vital to these poems, and, as I said earlier, without ever subsuming the artistic to the political. Shortly, I'd like to talk about the poem "Batter My Heart, Transgender'd God," but first I'm wondering if you could talk about a couple

of sequences that just really knocked me out politically and artistically: the “On Nights” sequence and the “On the Days” sequence. You could go anywhere you want or say anything you want about the poems. What do you think readers should really know about these poems coming into them, or how do you see the poems functioning in the book?

MD: That’s an interesting question. I hadn’t thought through how I wanted readers to approach those poems as a whole. The “On Nights” and the “On the Days” poems are very closely tied to my experience of moving from Oakland, California, to Salt Lake City. When I got here, when I got to Utah, the culture shock—the shellshock, really—affected my work in ways that I couldn’t have anticipated, mostly because moving here affected my body in different ways. I’m at a much higher elevation, I’m landlocked for the first time ever in my life, and, you know, that put me in a position to sort of have to reimagine what it was to be *this* body in *this* place. I had become really comfortable, I think, in the body that I had in the Bay. And so the “On Nights” series is very much, for me, an exploration of what is possible and, at the same time, trying to take into account sort of what or who got me here. And so I did a lot of thinking through, you

know, what kind of poets or what kind of people had to exist—or had to *perish*, really—for me to come to understand what I understood at the time about myself. Looking through my history, Amelia Earhart is the first figure that I can remember as a young person having a crush on. I can remember very clearly: third grade, Laurie Picard’s third-grade class (Hi, Mrs. Picard), and learning about Amelia Earhart in an encyclopedia and looking at that picture and thinking, *I can’t figure out if I want you or want to be you*. And so there is that moment for me where Amelia Earhart and sort of all of the mystery around Amelia Earhart and all of the rumors around Amelia Earhart really appealed to me. I knew, literally, one person in Salt Lake prior to arriving and was thinking, *What is my mythology? What is it that I am going to make of myself here? And how much freedom do I have?* I felt like I could literally be whoever I wanted to be—it was as intoxicating as it was terrifying. And similarly, thinking through history and the way I felt the general public in Salt Lake reacted to my gender presentation when I moved here, “On Nights When I Am Brandon Teena” came out of a real anxiety and fear that I had in moving here that was totally based in preconceptions and stereotypes about living in a place like

Utah. And then the ridiculous and kind of awful irony of that is: in my first year here, I was violently jumped and beaten—and certainly did not experience the same thing that Brandon Teena did, seeing as I’m still living, but I think those poems came about as a way for me to try to find my footing here via a lineage I could point to. And then the “On the Days” sequence came much, much later. This is my fourth winter here. And I wrote those poems, the “On the Days” poems, probably a month or two before we went to print. They were not poems that were originally in the manuscript. They were poems written very late in the game. I do see the poems as a transition to sort of a new self, a new understanding of reality. There are nights where I am Amelia, and there are nights where I am Brandon Teena, and there are nights where I am two horses racing. And there is a lot more I could say there but I don’t want to just yammer on and on.

TT: When I’m asking questions for the podcast, I always want to find a fine line between asking about process but making sure the people I’m interviewing doesn’t feel like they have to reveal all the mysteries. I want to give a taste of the book but make sure that readers who are encountering the book for the first time now don’t feel like all the answers

are there and feel like, *Oh I don’t need to read the book now*.

MD: Sure. Sure.

TT: I’m thinking of a couple things in what you were saying. First, just purely in terms of how the book came together, I’m thinking of how these were the last poems—because I’m always fascinated by how we construct our books. They don’t read like the last poems you wrote a month before you went to print. They just fit seamlessly in the book and they lead to the title poem in the book really nicely. As you were talking about those sequences, it got me thinking about one of the other questions that came to mind when I read the book. This sense of how Utah affected you, how the sense of place in Utah affected you. I’d say that, as a reader, I feel that sense of freedom as the book moves into Utah. There is a moment—and I’m sorry I can’t remember which poem it was—there is a moment where somebody in one of the poems says, somebody in the Bay Area, says something like, “Why do you want to move there?” I know I’m paraphrasing that part of the poem really poorly, but there is that intense emotion like, “Why would you go to *Utah*?” As a reader, I’m thinking, how is this move going to be engaged in the book? But there is this sense that you are

making a history for yourself in Utah when we get to that moment in the book.

MD: I think that was one of the really great gifts of moving. I think I did receive just an incredible amount of pushback from my community in the Bay because of our false misconceptions of what it is to live in the middle of the country. And I'm not even really in the middle of the country. I'm in the Mountain West. And I do think that there is great opportunity opened up to me in terms of the freedom that you're speaking to, but also in the way that actual geography and being a stranger in a place allows for a new evaluation of self and a new evaluation of work. I think that the work I've been making here I couldn't have made in California, and so I'm grateful for that.

TT: I'm a person who will resist major transitions in my life— especially like moving—until the very last moment. I always know, in the back of my mind, when I do those major transitions, that I need to experience the sort of thing you said earlier: I need to realign what it means for my body to be in that place. The transition to a new space produces new work. It changes my relationship to my work. But we also know that movement is always scary—you're working without a history in that moment. Let's hear an excerpt from the book.

MD: Sure. I'm just going to read a short poem. It's titled "Aubade for One Still Uncertain of Being Born." This poem was written pretty much in the middle of constructing the manuscript. And it's a poem that I like a lot and doesn't get a lot of airtime at readings.

Aubade for One Still Uncertain of Being Born

Lie still. Make their desperate hunt for your heart
beat them frenzied & let them second-guess
your muted tempo as counterfeit for their own.
Press your palm, still learning to unfurl,
to your den's wet beams & steady yourself
against the doorjamb of your lair; it will be time
when it is time. If your mother is a horse—& I am,
I am—let her approach Troy with you still hidden
within. Let her carry you like a bouquet of splinters
in her belly of timber still hot from hatching
at the future for firewood like it was a family tree.
All your life they will surround you, will stalk & strain
to hear that ballad from your canary pipes, will tempt
your quiet cover, will kick the keg of your desire
until it is dented nameless; all your life they will try
to say you are built for something else. It begins now—
so hush, hush: be nothing, just this once.

TT: There is no way to transition into this easily, so just bear with me. But I've got to say that, in doing the podcast, I've never had the chance to talk about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets. It just doesn't come up. You know where I'm going now.

MD: That's the real shocker. [Laughs]

TT: Right. And so for the trillions of listeners out there across 12 galaxies: we're still in the twenty-first century, but I really want to talk about your response to John Donne's "Batter My Heart Three-Person'd God" in your poem "Batter My Heart Transgender'd God." For me, it's one of the key poems in the book, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what led you to re-envision Donne in this poem the way that you do.

MD: This is an exciting question for me because mostly, I think, the response to this poem is sort of like a lighthearted chuckle of, "Oh, isn't that cute what you did there." And it's an important sort of keystone to me in the book because it is a site of direct homage, direct gratitude. "Batter My Heart Three-Person'd God": I encountered this poem very early on in my sort of academic endeavors, long before I decided that creative writing or poetry was a thing that I wanted to pursue in

school. I can remember reading the poem and thinking, *Three-person'd god?* I was a person who was raised in a Christian home. I came up in the Presbyterian Church. I went to Catholic school much of my younger life. "Three-person'd god"—even though I understood all of the implications of that, it still sounded to me as if it was akin to an experience that I had had as somebody who was not necessarily female, not necessarily male, not necessarily *both*, but something else entirely. And, similarly so, with not really being hearing, definitely not being Deaf. Hard-of-hearing, but not yet identifying as such. The idea of the in-between-ity of all of these identities intersecting in a being that one could talk to or require things of. It sounded really queer to me, really genderqueer—really like having a *body* that is queer, via either hearing or lack of hearing or otherwise. It opened for me, I think, as a young queer person, a way to rethink what spirituality could look like. And I don't know that John Donne and I have the same god. I mean, I'm actually pretty certain that we don't share a god. But it did evoke for me a particular kind of reverence for who it was that had made it possible for me to be here. I spoke to that a little bit earlier, but Donne says, basically, imprison me or I'll never be free. And the idea of being, you know, tied—however that happens,

literally, figuratively—to one's lineage, I think, was really necessary for me as a queer person who was at the time really ready to forget the lineage that had made it possible for me to even exist safely in the world or close to safely. Is that making sense at all so far?

TT: It's making total sense. I guess this goes back to my maybe wacky-sounding transition to the question. I think someone who is just reading on the surface might just say, "Well, how does John Donne's impassioned prayer and embodied prayer to his god—how does that become relevant to a queer person in the twenty-first century?" But you're saying the poem is part of this enormous homage to Donne even though you are recognizing grave differences with John Donne. But queering Donne is an important way of continuing part of what he is doing, while also re-envisioning him for yourself and the twenty-first century—and for what it means to be in those in-between spaces you are talking about.

MD: Definitely. And also to re-envision devotional poetics in general. "Lord" comes up a lot in my poems and especially in this book. I mean the book is titled *Last Psalm At Sea Level*. And I think that as a queer person, both

in queer spaces and in perhaps more homophobic spaces (that's a generous term), I think that I've gotten a lot of pushback for using language like "Lord" or "God." And I'm really, really interested in investigating that and reclaiming that. Not because I have a particular spiritual bent. I definitely don't. But because I have always, you know—when I write, I look up. You know, I'm interested in speaking to something that *feels* present, but I can't prove. And so I am interested in that, in that sort of reclamation of devotional poetics for folks that are supposedly not supposed to be in conversation with it.

TT: I like the way you put that: "When I write, I look up." That says so much. Even though the book is titled *Last Psalm At Sea Level* and it has this reconnection to devotional poetics, it never feels like you are pushing devotional poetics on us at all. And, in fact, even in the re-envisioning of the Donne poem, I never feel like there is an effort to go transcendent on us. We're in the material body—we're in material space with all the ecstasies and conflicts that come from that, and I think this actually makes the devotional impulse more powerful for me as a reader. I want to take us back a little toward politics, not to push it a little bit, but just to get at a question that I like to ask everybody that I interview. I like to kind of pull the

curtain back on one of the poems and the process of writing one of the poems in the book, to talk about how one poem came about. It doesn't always have to be analytical. It can be simply an account of what was going on around you when you wrote the poem—something like the music you were listening to when you were revising it, or anything that can give us more of the space around the poem and what was going on around the poem. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little about this in terms of the poem "To My Student, Who Asked, 'Since When Does a Bunch of Normal People Standing Around Actually Change Anything?'" And I love saying that title, too.

MD: This poem was written literally in response to a student who asked, "Since when does a bunch of normal people standing around actually change anything?" It was written in, I think, February of 2012, when Trayvon Martin was murdered in his neighborhood. And across the country there were protests coming out, you know, very similar to what we see right now in support of black lives and protesting specifically some of the legislation around guns and whatnot. In my introductory Rhetoric and Composition class, we were reading some of these news pieces that were responding to either the protests happening across the country

or some of the news reporting around George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin, and the intention was to have conversations about fallacies and the way that arguments are constructed with ulterior motives in mind. And in the midst of that, the conversation swayed toward talking about the larger public's response. I think that one of the biggest differences between Utah and where I lived in California, other than racial disparity, is the politics—and not just politics but the *attitude* toward politics. There aren't the same kinds of conversations around politics happening in Salt Lake like I experienced in Oakland, and there's much less transparency of thought when folks are talking about issues that they perceive as difficult—such as race, such as racial violence. And so there's this culture of political quietude, or a little bit of passive aggression, where folks here are much more hesitant to say what they really think because they don't want to upset you. I guess it's sort of the politics of niceties or the politics of a certain respectability. And so to have my students so boldly ask, "Well, why does this matter? Seriously, people are walking in the streets and they're breaking windows? What did they think was going to happen?"... Currently, at least on my Facebook feed, I'm experiencing a lot of similar things where, you know, a lot of mostly white, mostly self-proclaimed

liberal people want to talk about how, yeah, it's really awful that black people are being murdered, but do we have to smash windows and burn cop cars and be in the street delaying my commute to work? And, I mean, I'm trying not to betray my feelings, but it's too much.

TT: You can say anything you want. Just to jump in real quick: I don't want you to lose your train of thought, but, as you're building to talk about what's been happening on your Facebook feed (people who might be saying, "I get it, there are some racial problems in this country, but why do you have to disrupt my commute"), *that's* part of the power of this poem for me. It's one thing to have someone just come up and say some overtly horrific, racist shit—and then you just respond directly to that. But it's another thing when someone comes in in that sort of backdoor kind of way and says, "Oh, no, I understand that these are terrible issues, but I just don't want my commute to be disrupted and why do windows have to be broken?" And I think that's part of what, for me, what the poem is pivoting on.

MD: And I do think that caution that I had in writing this poem is the same caution that I felt in that moment in my own classroom, when you can tell that

the student is asking because he is upset, at the same time that he is asking because he's *actually, literally* interested in the answer. He's earnestly trying to figure out why so many people are doing this thing that, he believes, as a white man, in his scenario, is not actually going to affect—you know, it's not going to, in his mind, bring Trayvon Martin back to life. And I think that in that moment we have to look to the ways that those political actions and direct action has affected history, and what happens when a great percentage of the country is in the streets blocking freeways. Or, ultimately, a great percentage of a college campus walks out and there is no one in classrooms, and instead the conversation is happening outside. And so, you know, the poem is also a way for me to sort of archive my own education (you know, my encountering Rosa Parks in a very particular way in the poem, my understanding and education around the protests at Gallaudet University), and to understand the ways that even if actions like that or protests or sit-ins certainly didn't bring dead folks back to life, they did make it much more possible for me, despite the fact that I am white, despite the fact that I carry masculine privilege, to move through a world that allows me to be transparent about those privileges and have conversations with white, male, cisgender, straight students in Salt Lake

City, Utah. You know, the opportunity to do that was made possible by every single person in that poem. And also, it was a moment of exasperation where I was like, “Seriously? You have a smartphone that you are on for the majority of my class and you have no idea? Just none?” There is a little bit of exasperation in that.

TT: I also want to talk about the craft elements of the poem. If the poem were just exasperation...I don't always get drawn to poems about the academic life or what happens in classrooms. It might be just because teaching is my job, or because I'm doing that all the time, or because of the privilege of the U.S. higher-education classroom—those poems don't always unsettle me. So, if this poem were just about exasperation, then I'd be like, “Well, we get exasperated, our students get exasperated, life goes on.” But, you know, I get unsettled by this poem, as I should. You're talking about the way history becomes a craft element in the poem. That's really important. The poem is so personal—it's also a poem that manages to be personal while never losing sight of the systemic issues that make the poem happen, that make the student say what he says. The other thing that I want to say about craft, and I think this also brings me back to the John Donne revision, back to “Batter My Heart Transgender'd God”:

it's just amazing the way you build to the closing couplet of the Donne revision—and the same thing happens with “To My Student, Who Asked, ‘Since When Does a Bunch of Normal People Standing Around Actually Change Anything?’” I won't read the final line; I'm not going to spoil it for listeners with my question. But the way you get to that line—I got there and I had one of those moments where I realized, yeah, this poem is very carefully, very painstakingly, building an architecture that is meant to make me feel like I'm entering a little room in here, like I'm entering an amazing room that encloses that final line. I'd like to close with a question about another poem in the book, “On the Day I Buried My Singing.” It speaks so movingly at the intersection of languages, at the intersection of English and American Sign Language. I'm wondering if you could talk a little about this poem and the importance of Deaf culture and sign language to your work in general.

MD: Sure. “On The Day I Buried My Singing” started, or the poem began, because I was trying my hand for the first time at translating ASL poetry into English and just failed miserably. And so this is that failure. Clayton Valli is hands down my favorite Deaf poet and he was somebody that I never got to see perform live as a young person, but whose work

I watched sort of religiously once I was exposed to him. One of my greatest mail days was receiving a VHS tape of his work in the post, in the mail, and being able to just sort of watch that and rewind and watch it and rewind it. I think that Clayton Valli infused in me a real respect for the *craft* of something *in addition to* the performance of it. You know, I came up in spoken-word and performance poetry. That's how I understood much of my community and much of my world for a number of years, because I was touring stages, spitting poems. And I think that Clayton Valli's work constantly pushed me. Sure, I could shut down a room because of learned stage presence or the sort of momentum that a voice builds. We see this with politicians and preachers and people on television all of the time, and then when you look at it on the page, it's like, “Wait a minute.” And this is not at all to say (I think that a majority of folks working in slam poetry right now have really, really stepped up their game) that I think slam suffers on the page what it puts out on the stage. That's not at all what I mean. But I do think that Clayton Valli and his attention to detail, his attention to emotion, made me work harder because of the challenges of translating ASL into English, mostly because of the grammar.

In American Sign Language, the grammar is in the face, and I haven't yet figured out how to do that. I don't know how to take facial grammar and put it into commas and periods and semicolons and dashes. I think that's going to end up being something that, later on down the line, I live my way into and practice my way into. But this particular poem is the site of my first real attempt and, well, my greatest failure at it—and also the site of realizing just how much lyricism I have inherited from ASL. ASL is a fluid language. It's a bimodal language. Despite the fact that so many programs in the U.S. are teaching ASL at the college level, it's a disappearing language. And I think that there is something deeply, deeply lyric about the combination of movement, hand shape, facial grammar, and emotion that informs my lyricism on the page. And I feel so much gratitude for that. And I think in moments in which I am more involved in the Deaf community and moments when I am more attentive to Deaf poets in the world, my work is better for it. And that's a little bit of where my academic work focuses, too, so I feel fortunate in that regard.

TT: It's a poem where your academic work and your poetics can inhabit the same space.

MD: Yeah, they get to hang out for once.

with a rifle of his own—

Sorrow,

I will follow your hoofprints anywhere
but to the shoreline that made me
a tidepool instead of solid stone. I wish
instead for a field of corn: I wish for a season
that does not begin with the quick tides
of ache. I wish for a compass that leads
me like a horse to water, but leaves me
at the edge of an unfenced field
& I wish the god of this place would
come down from the roof & wake
me herself.

interview with DOUGLAS KEARNEY

Tony Trigilio: I'd like to start talking a little bit about the structure of *Patter*. When we put our books together, sometimes they come together really easily, and sometimes they're an incredible labor. The best thing, though, is when I'm reading a book and it looks like it just fell into place. And that's how *Patter* feels to me. Whether it did fall into place or not, it feels that way. I appreciate the way the sectioning really gives me an infrastructure of what is going on—not just individually, but culturally, at the core of the book. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about the structuring: maybe some of the decisions you made, or what was the most surprising or most difficult for you when you were putting the book together?

Douglas Kearney: Absolutely. First of all, thank you for the good word on the structuring. I often think of "the book" as a kind of macro poem. Once you have all the poems that are going to fill a collection,

your book can become sort of a larger poem. *Patter* was interesting because I did an exercise at the beginning of working on it, when I knew that I had to finish *Patter* for a particular contract with Red Hen. What I did was, I created a table of contents where I said, "OK, I'm going to have these poems that I've already written, and then I need to write these other poems." I was working on *Patter* and I realized that I was not going to be able to write the amount of poems that I thought this table of contents was going to require, and I was panicking about that, actually.

So to get out of that anxiety, I said, "Let me just imagine Red Hen called and said we need the book today—like right now. What would that book be?" And that was the most important part of the process. I printed out what I had and I moved from the computer to the hardcopies, which is always a really important thing for me, and I just put up a big stack and I began this process of taking poems out and deciding what was going to actually stay. Once I did that, and I had the core of the book, I think maybe I wrote about six or seven more poems after that.

But the hardest decision for me was whether to do it chronologically or to use something closer to the structure that I ended up using. And what I ended up doing was trying to divide it up into

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So to get out of that anxiety, I said, "Let me just imagine Red Hen called and said we need the book today—like right now. What would that book be?" And that was the most important part of the process. I printed out what I had and I moved from the computer to the hardcopies, which is always a really important thing for me, and I just put up a big stack and I began this process of taking poems out and deciding what was going to actually stay. Once I did that, and I had the core of the book, I think maybe I wrote about six or seven more poems after that.

But the hardest decision for me was whether to do it chronologically or to use something closer to the structure that I ended up using. And what I ended up doing was trying to divide it up into

concentrations of thought and ideas, as opposed to sort of thinking, *I have to talk about the miscarriage at this point in the book because that's going to set up being able to do a lot of the poems that are in the end*. It began to sort of coalesce around these groupings of thought. The first section is really looking at the idea of fatherhood in things that predate my ambitions toward becoming a father. So poems about when I was 14, or just these "famous fathers," and then moving into the miscarriage as a kind of inciting event for the book as a whole. And then moving more into the sort of cultural, and thus political, sections. The section "It is Designed for Children" speaks to the institution of parenthood, but specifically for me, what it means to have Black children in this particular historical moment—or really any period of American history. What that means right now, with these questions around the fairy tales we use to educate our children. And what is the task of educating a child that you hope will grow up to be a healthy, well-adjusted, and safe adult. And so that kind of forms, in many ways, the structural core—the center, the hub—of the book.

But originally, when I was planning that section, I was going to have about three or four more poems like the poem

"Word Hunt." I was going to have these sort of connect-the-dots sort of things, because I was projecting: *Oh, this should be like an activity book, a children's activity book, in the middle of this book*. And as I worked on this book, I couldn't move these pieces from that state of "This is a neat idea" into something that was actually compelling, or didn't feel like a kind of... not an interruption, I don't mind the idea of an interruption—but a gimmick. I couldn't figure out a way to make those work, and every time I worked another "Word Hunt" poem, I felt like it weakened that first one. So that was going to be a very different section, and I remember talking it over with some of the folks in Red Hen when I was first starting to work on the book, and I said, "Yeah, there is going to be this section with connect-the-dots and word searches and word morphs," and they were very excited about that. And later I remember very sheepishly saying, "Yeah, I'm not going to do that. It wasn't working." But I still have the journals where I was working on these, especially the connect-the-dots poems. I published some pages from them in *Mess and Mess and*.

TT: I love the way you describe the book as a macro poem. Sometimes, as writers, our individual "neat ideas" are not so neat

when we eventually look at the macro poem.

DK: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that to me is like, the biggest thing: sequencing. I know they call it that in the music industry. I might have a poem that I love, that I feel is extraordinarily effective, that I've read and submitted, and people have accepted it, but if it doesn't fit that sort of macro poem, which to me is distinct from the idea of the "project book," I can't keep it in there, because I know if I keep it in there, I know why I'm doing it: I know I'm putting it in there because I think it is a neat idea, but the book to me is something different. I'm just really plugged into this idea of the macro poem, and I think that while, at some point, as a kind of thought experiment, it might be really interesting to imagine a book that uses some other kind of system, some other kind of sense of sequencing, right now I feel like I'm kind of in that mode—I'm in the macro poem.

TT: And I like how the macro poem, too, takes care of so many different kinds of aesthetics. I'll talk to my students about, you know, creating a narrative arc in their books. And then when I have students who aren't working in narrative, I have to say, "Narrative, but in the different way that you are defining narrative."

DK: Exactly. Exactly.

TT: So “macro poem” sort of takes care of all of it.

DK: Teaching at CalArts, there are so many different kinds of approaches to the individual poem: the idea of the collection of poems, or you can have the hybrid poem, or the hybrid piece of writing, and then you have the hybrid collection, which isn’t saying, “These are prose poems.” It’s saying, “Oh, this is an essay, and here are some poems and here’s a short story—and how do you begin thinking about that?” And, for me, the macro poem allows me to think almost in terms of the reader’s experience as reading everything in one setting and in one sitting. Diana Arterian wrote a really generous review of *Patter* for *Coldfront*, and she said in that review that one of the things that would be advisable would be to read it in one sitting. And that, for me, has always been a way that I’ve tried to imagine the books, so I can begin to think: *OK, when is the reader going to get tired, when is the reader going to feel energized, when do I need to pause?* And so, to me, that becomes an organizing principle. You know, it also allows me to capture something that I’ve always loved contextually about the long poem, which is the ability to have enough room to sort of establish a kind of pattern

or a kind of rhythm so that, when you have something that contrasts it, it is clear. You feel that contrast. You feel that shift. You feel the change in musicality. I think about my first book, *Fear, Some*. Many of the poems in that book (I think there are only about 25 poems in the 96-page collection, because there was one extraordinarily obnoxiously long poem) are at least two spreads. In *Patter*, the poems get shorter. I still kind of crave the sense of what that longer poem can allow you to do. And so that *has* fit for me—and has felt very native to me as a way of thinking about the book.

TT: I see what you mean about how important it is, even though we know people don’t always read books of poetry start-to-finish.

DK: Absolutely.

TT: As you were talking, I was thinking about the way that you work with the body in these poems, and how the holistic sense of the book gives us a lot of different experiences of being in the body and being *with* the body. I know, given the subject matter, that the body has to be crucial in this book. But what I’m really attracted to, and what I really appreciate, is that everything is not just happening in the interiority of the body.

There’s this external historical sensibility that is always acting on the body, and acted on by the body. I’m wondering if you could talk a bit about your experiences writing with, and writing through, the body.

DK: In the book that was published before this, *The Black Automaton*, I was thinking about the body as sort of “absented.” This place of, “Let’s look for the body and where the body should be. It’s not there.” It’s writing about the body at risk, but almost via outline, via the negative space around it. With *Patter*, I really wanted to address the body. The subject matter of the book had been something that was a major part of my day-to-day life, especially starting around 2005 to now. So the body—the body was there. But I was really interested in the work of CM Burroughs, and how she works with the body—how the body becomes a kind of site of inquiry. And also a sort of staging area, where these issues of drama and vulnerability and cruelty and danger can be played out. And so I was really interested in how *wet* that book felt. And *The Black Automaton*, in my sense, had been willfully, intentionally sort of arid. So I wanted to go back into the body. Trying to have children, especially once you realize you’re not going to be able to do it without medical help, creates an interesting sort of abstracting of these processes. In

preparation for the IVF procedure, I had to give my wife a series of injections that were painful and clinical, and yet at the same time sort of slant-rhymed with sexual penetration. The actual conception of our children took place with us in two different rooms. I’m in a bathroom at a clinic—literally in a bathroom at a clinic looking at pornography, and my wife is on a table someplace behind this thick curtain and the sexual act is going to take place outside of us. And so you have this fascinating sort of alienation of the body at the same time that everything we’re dealing with is *about* body fluid. You know, my wife was hyperemetic, as the book suggests, so she was vomiting all the time. Everybody who has ever had children, or been around freshly made children, knows that the human body is this place where very terrible things can happen.

TT: It’s quite a site of inquiry.

DK: It is! A site of inquiry. I wanted to honor that. And one thing that I was really dead-set against for a number of reasons was a kind of romanticization. It was important to me to recognize that, yes, I am a male writing in large part about processes that are not a part of what my body can do. I am writing about the woman who married me, and her body, and saying, you know, you know: “I love

it, I hate it." You know, "I love your body, I hate it." I wanted to fight against the trope of hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of years of men writing about the female body to sort of create this mystical place of wonder or a kind of a dark woods where horrible things happen. And so a lot of the poems are documenting that struggle, that rhetorical struggle, that compositional struggle. But, all in all, I wanted to talk about the... I don't even want to call it the ugliness of the body, because that, too, is a kind of performance. I wanted to talk about a kind of unvarnished treatment of the body that at times seemed crude, at times seemed irreverent. But my goal wasn't to be irreverent. My goal was to attempt, to just sort of say: "This is what we are dealing with on a day-to-day basis in the act of trying to have kids." And once we had the kids, my colleague, Tisa Bryant, called the book "anatomically democratic." It's full of everybody's genitals. It's full of all those sort of things.

TT: Which makes it real.

DK: And that, to me, was essential. I had to talk about it in this sense of, "Well, this is what I'm seeing. This is what I'm thinking about." And to just sort of look at our first signage, our first writing: the body. Our first literature, as Tracy K. Smith refers to it. And that, for me, just became the

thing that guided what poems could be in there—the thing that guided what revision strategies I would use for poems that were almost ready. And to a certain extent it played a role in the sequencing, as I began thinking about the formation of the bodies of my children. What is the book's body? For me, it's very difficult to imagine a focus on the bodies of the people in my family and not think of the political history of the black body and the cultural presentation of the black body. What is it approximated with? What are the risk factors of this particular body? It's very rarely, for me, a sense of, "Oh, I have to make sure to put that in." It's how I imagine this body, and it's how I imagine people see it. And, of course, when you're writing at the same time as Trayvon Martin's murder, you begin thinking about what that body is. What are the dangers to it most immediately? And that just became inseparable.

TT: The everyday dangers of that body. For folks who might be coming to the book for the first time, I really appreciate what you're saying about the body—the messiness of the body in the book.

DK: Mess! That's it! Messiness!

TT: It feels real because it's messy. It's a site of inquiry that is very messy. The

messiness of that site is very important. And it's political too as you imagine: *OK, what is it going to be like to be black children in this world?* And one of the poems that really knocked me out in that regard, thinking about race and your children's bodies, was "Thank You But Please Don't Buy My Children Clothes With Monkeys On Them." Can you talk a little about that poem? It's a devastating poem—and it has to be devastating.

DK: Well, thank you. That poem is rooted in a lot of, frankly, just daily conversations that my wife and I had once the kids were coming and once they were born. We would insist to people "Don't buy any clothes for our kids with monkeys on them." We would look at everything—we would look at highchairs. They're either under the sea or a jungle scene. And so we were like, "If you do the jungle, there is always a monkey in it." It's anticipating...on some level it's anticipating a joke. It's anticipating a mockery. But it's anticipating an insult. It's anticipating a possible moment of dehumanization. I'll be honest, yesterday—literally yesterday—my kids and I were in the supermarket. I have a son and a daughter, so when I think about the body at risk, I also have to think about my daughter's female body at risk. But we're in the store, and my son happens to love watermelons. He loves watermelons. We

all have carts, and my daughter has one of the smaller shopping carts because it's her turn to push that. My son is helping me push the big cart because it's his turn to do that. And we're walking to the produce section and my daughter goes, "Elijah, look, there are some watermelons! You love watermelons!" And he goes, "I do love watermelons!" I'm standing there and, you know, this beautiful moment of my kids knowing what each other is interested in—this very unselfish gesture—and my immediate response is to look around and see who's in that section with me. To try to look at the micro-expressions. That is a big part of a poem like "Thank You But Please Don't Buy My Children Clothes With Monkeys On Them."

We were at the playground once, and my daughter was on the jungle-gym structure, on the "monkey bars" and she's playing, and she says, "Hey daddy, look at me—I'm a little monkey," because she's heard parents of all ethnicities and races refer to their kids, playing, as, "Oh, look, a little monkey." And my immediate reaction was, "No, you're an *acrobat*, honey. You're an *acrobat*."

TT: You're an acrobat!

DK: Yes! And she's like, *OK*. She was two-and-a-half or three at the time, but that is sort of a constant...I'm not going to say

for everybody, but for a lot of folks, it's a kind of constant consideration. This poem comes out of those anxieties, but also, beyond this sort of standup-comedy neurosis of the thing, there is also the fact that it is so much easier to kill somebody that you don't think of as being a person. The first part of this poem that really came to my mind for me was the section that goes, "precious lil monkeys." I imagined a page overrun with the words "lil monkeys" climbing on everything, getting everywhere. And so, to me, that was the night sweat of it, like, "Oh, these monkeys are everywhere and getting all over everything and sort of interrupting something." And so this poem, and especially this part of the poem, developed out of that. But once I had that, I wanted to be able to talk about why this means something—to really reach out. To me, this poem is really attempting to reach out and say, "This is why. This is why. Can't you understand that this is why? It isn't just sensitivity. It isn't just a knee-jerk reaction to racialized language. This is a part of a history of danger. A part of a history of not being able to keep children safe." At that point, the poem, and its title (and I really haven't thought about it in this sort of concrete way), are saying, "I appreciate you wanting to do something for my children. Let's continue this *kind of*

conversation around what you can do for my children," or, "Part of what you can do is realize why these things are problems, why it's terrifying." It doesn't just make me angry. It's terrifying to imagine that no matter what my children accomplish, no matter what they do, no matter how well behaved they are...I can completely buy in to everything I'm told makes a good kid, makes a good American kid, but somebody could see one of my children walking down the street in our neighborhood, decide that he or she doesn't belong there, and can kill that child. And then, I could have to deal with the nation telling me—a huge percentage of this nation, of *adults*—telling me that my kid had it coming. And that to me is terrifying. It's enraging, and it makes you feel helpless. And it makes you feel hopeless. Because it doesn't matter at the end of the day what you do. And that to me is what drives this poem. And so many of the poems in the book have that right there, but for this poem in particular (as for "It Is Designed for Children"), this is the lesson. What is the lesson I'm going to teach my kids? Ernesto Mercer wrote this remarkable poem that I think he put out on Facebook very shortly after Trayvon Martin's murder, where he says, essentially, that the job of raising a kid—a black child—is that eventually you, as a responsible parent, have to break your child before someone else can. There's an

exchange where the child in Mercer's poem says to the speaker—and I'm paraphrasing, "But you told me to be proud of myself. You told me to be brave. You told me to stick up for myself." And the speaker of the poem must say, "Right, but when it's a police officer—don't, don't. Do what they say. Follow their instructions. It doesn't matter if you were doing something wrong or not. Do what they say." It's heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking to think that, for many of us, this is not only a viable parental strategy but a necessary parental strategy.

TT: Not just a choice but something that is required.

DK: Exactly. It's required. That no matter what, someone's going to say, "Well, he should have followed instructions." Regardless of whether the instructions were not based on anything other than, "Here is this black body in this space." I started this poem before Trayvon Martin's murder, but Trayvon Martin wasn't the first or the last. But that's in many ways what this poem wants to do. It wants to...I don't want to use the word "explain." It does at one level want to explain. I guess I think it does want to explain. In many ways, the rest of the other three sections of the poem explain or *refract* that "lil monkeys" section, which was the first one to come.

TT: "Explain" or "refract"—both of those verbs seem important, because this isn't just sensitivity, but it begins with a sense of, "Please be polite and don't do this," and then it explodes. And, as you said, the poem is just rooted in this history of danger, the black body and the history of danger that comes with that. I keep thinking of that story with your daughter and your son at the supermarket. And also another verb you used, "breaking," which is part of what could've been this otherwise wonderful moment of your daughter and son knowing each other so well, you know: "You like this!"

DK: Exactly! Exactly!

TT: But then at some point there is a history of danger. It's horrible that you're looking around for those micro-gestures. That whole space just gets overwhelmed that you're in. This story reads almost like a footnote to the poem.

DK: Yeah. Yeah.

TT: And still as devastating as the poem. Let's hear an excerpt from the book.

DK: Yes. Certainly. Might as well do an excerpt from "Thank You," since we've been talking about it. All right. So let's see.

“COSTCO PULLS ‘LIL MONKEY’ DOLL OFF SHELVES”—KTLA NEWS HEADLINE

THANK YOU BUT PLEASE DON'T BUY MY CHILDREN CLOTHES
WITH MONKEYS ON THEM

see & do **WHAT IT DO** say what
IT IS?

if evil here

WHAT IT DO?
swing some into history's way.

if evil here, who hear it?
a tree fall in the rigged jungle

(nobody here
but us _____)

if evil here, who see it?

WHAT

some see what sum get the get
of the once got.

(how much that lil
monnnkey in the window?)

if evil here, who speak it?

DO retail re-tell the re-tailing of—
(nobody here but us.)

history has a way

IT DO what it do.
?

[if] throughout history black baby bottoms's blue as a baboon's nose.

[if] throughout history black babies get blue black bottoms till the stump
of their circumcised tails black over.

[&] a circumcised black baby tail must not be discarded but kept
for later for show.

[thus] a circumcised black baby's tail was often for showed
after removal in a jar or dried on the mantle
below the buck bust.

[i.f.] sing a blues of black bottom! sing a blues of blueblack bottom!

[if] throughout history history has a way with blueing black babies.

[or] say history has a history of blacking black babies.

[or if] history has a history of blueblackening black babies blue.

[e.g.] peekaboo black babies's a black mama gut bucket blues.

[i.e.] you wanna see ma's black baby?

[&] jigaboo black babies is history blacking over a blue black hide.

[thus] picayune black babies's history's way
of knowing black babies is discarded
to hide its history of blacking black babies
blue as a baboon's nose knows tails.

[qed] pitiful black-at-the-bottom-babies!

precious
lil monkeys! curlicued tails troop queries on my babies. curious
lil monkeys and the uniformed overseer—who can tame them? unruly
lil monkeys no ways tired with new IDs and bipedal reveries. musing
lil monkeys's pointless—stick them with sticks! big leaps
lil monkeys: go chew on the saw of “fruit-falls-when-ripe.” wait! hungry
lil monkeys! smiling lil monkeys climbing pajamas.
lil monkeys pincer the cribs, bent senators, my daughter's onesie. leering
lil monkeys hands all murder sopped! put your hands up! hissing in lil monkey beards.
lil monkeys shot. love for
lil monkeys?! humans over lil monkeys, motherfucker!
lil monkeys over babies, bucking on the lamps, messing the light, smearing
lil monkey shadows on my son's face.
lil monkeys jibber from the nursery, porch, the street.
lil monkeys —a-ha! freeze! lil monkeys
lil monkeys foul my babies' clothes like blood, like shit.
lil monkeys no no
lil monkeys thank you no
lil monkeys noo thanks
noo o o ooo

haha!!!

black babies's born fit with looney tune gloves
over fists a-bristling opposable thumbs.
black babies in monkeysuits's nude as birds;
save onionskin sheets on their genital bunches.
black babies's genitals learn to sign quickly—
they do what they see and they don't stop no show.
black babies's last seen as blacker than not
and they can't stay getting away with it.
black babies's found up in trees and on sidewalks.
we fetch them with dust-bins and mops when it's done.

TT: We were talking about how the work with the physical body translates into the body of the book, and this makes me think more about the body of the page, too, especially the “lil monkeys” section that you were reading. For those who are coming to the book for the first time, you’ll get to page 48 and then you’re going to stop cold. You’re going to have to read that very slowly and let yourself be consumed by it. Doug, you’re one of contemporary poetry’s master craftspeople of the graphic design of the page. I really appreciate the job that you do when you take that graphic design of the page and you take it into the performance—you take it into the microphone. When you read from *Patter* last fall at Columbia College, I was really drawn to how the wild leaps of graphic design on the page become multilayered, sonic experience when you’re reading. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you approach readings, or maybe also talk about that moment of translating your work from the page into the reading or performance.

DK: Number one, thank you. Thank you for the really kind words. For me, if I do something typographically with a poem, it is at one level because what I want to accomplish verbally requires certain spatial approximations. If you take the first

section of “Thank You But Please Don’t Buy My Children Clothes With Monkeys On Them,” there’s a set of large texts that, going down, essentially ask the question: “What it do?” “It is?” “What it do?” “What do it do?” These have to sort of stand alone at one level, but they also have to be a part of the poem’s argument. Layering the text—stacking the text with “see” and “do” next to “what it do?”—allows me to repeat “What it do?” without typographically having to write it multiple times, which I think changes a sense of the composition of the page, but also changes the ultimate musicality of the page. The density that I wanted to have on that page is represented not just at the surface. It’s not just a look—it’s a way of looking at these two different sorts of discourses happening at one time. That, to me, is something that would be difficult to accomplish without doing some typographical effects. It starts off for me as a visual experience. It really does. There is, of course, the question of how any poem I write is going to be read. There is a section of this poem that I just read that is relatively conventional in terms of its typographical arrangement. Those questions of how I’m going to read are important to me both when it does look left-aligned, left-justified, or when it does kind of go all over the page. And, in fact, a lot of the typography that I’ve done

was created on one level to undermine oral performance for myself. If you were to look at “Blues Done Red”—I can’t read this poem. I can’t read this poem “accurately” without a number of technological interventions, yet I feel like the reading you can do of this poem, looking at the page, is richer because, as a reader, you can manage a kind of simultaneity. Or a poem like “Every Hard Rapper’s Father Ever: Father of the Year”—there’s a section I can’t do. I can approximate it, but that approximation transforms it so that, if you are reading it to yourself, in that sound system of your mind, the poem is truer to me than if I were to perform it. So what I found, which has perhaps been counterintuitive to some folks who read the book and commented on the book or asked me questions about it (and even about the book *The Black Automaton*) is that, while these poems are at some level a performance score, they are performance scores for a performance that I think best takes place in your head. Because that’s where I first imagined it. I imagined the musicality of it and heard it in my head and quickly realized, well, if I want it to sound like this, I can’t do it. If somebody says, “Hey, read ‘Blues Done Red,’” like I’m taking a request, I’ll be like, “Uhhhh, OK, well, let’s see.” *The Black Automaton*, like “Blues Done Red,”

uses what people usually call a flowchart or a mapping system or a visual analog of such. What I’ve done in the past is, I’ve passed out photocopies or a copy of the book to a member of the audience and asked that person to sequence it—to put numbers next to the order in which they think I should read stanzas or individual lines, and then I do my best to replicate that reading. If they think I should repeat something, they should put more than one set of numbers next to it. And I do not read those poems without that kind of intervention. Sometimes I’m using a photocopy with sequencing that was made before. But I don’t read those poems without that intervention, because I’m more interested in how other people read the poem, and then presenting that reading becomes a space which, I think, manages to maintain my certain ambivalences about it. You take a red-eye flight someplace and you get to your hotel, you know, at 11:00, and you’re meeting with students at 1:00 and your big reading is at 6:00—and sometimes I will look at a page that I’ve written, and that I’ve designed, and the typography at that moment can sometimes seem like sort of a goad, like, “Do it! Do it! You know how this has to be done! Do it!” And in those moments, I sometimes feel subject to this decision that I made a while ago. But I’m also saying (and this is perhaps very geeky)

that when I finished *The Black Automaton* and those flowchart kinds of things, I asked myself a really straightforward question, which was: “Can this same approach, this same visual approach, this same compositional approach, be used in the space of the lyric poem? Can I use this in the space that is a bit more like the lyric?” And in many ways “Blues Done Red” is an attempt to see that—to see, well, does it work? And by “work,” I mean the question of demanding a certain order, the question of demanding a certain way that can resolve itself, can coalesce—where is that demand more pertinent in a more philosophical poem, versus where is it more pertinent in a more personal poem. Where does that come? So, for me, the typography is also an investigation of the foundational ideas of poetic composition. And composition not only in the physical sense, but in the ideational sense and the structure of the poem. How do we rhetorically compose? At one level, these are investigations, and they are investigations that I feel are directly integral to the poems in which they appear. I know when I begin doing something typographically to a poem because I don’t think it’s working and I’m like, “Well I need to do something, I need to jazz it up, I need to throw some, you know, rhinestones on this thing”—and those poems generally don’t make it out of the journal. They generally don’t. That is the kind

of discipline that I’m really trying to honor. That if a reader is going to pick up a book of poems and be confronted with layered text—text all skewed and canted—I feel like I have to say there is a reason for this, in the same way that I would say there’s a reason for this comma, there’s a reason for this line break. For me, that’s a huge part of not only thinking about it in terms of performance, but really thinking about it in terms of the composition of any poem. “Should this be a metaphor or a simile?”—I will ask that question. I will also ask the questions “Should this text be larger? Should it overlap? How should it overlap?” And in some cases, like in the poem “Atomic Buckdance” from my first book, or a poem like “Quantum Spit” from my chapbook, determining if this poem should slant upwards or downwards is actually not just a question of visual referents. It is a kind of genealogy of intent. These decisions are not like what some people might imagine—they are certainly not about hyping up the page. They’re about: if I can create a visual figure that allows me to *not* do a certain kind of exposition, to not do a certain kind of writing in a certain space, then I consider that a rich possibility and a benefit to the poem.

TT: “Blues Done Red” is a perfect example of what we’re talking about, because that two-page spread does look like a flowchart. It’s also a representation of what

you’re talking about it—the musicality of the page. You know, often we talk about the musicality of language, which is everywhere in your work, too, but you aren’t just creating visual explosions for the sake of explosions on the page. They have a purpose in each individual poem. They have their own musicality. And I really appreciate what you were saying about the reader’s experience, because we can go flush-left on the lyric poem, and we all do that—some of your poems do that, too. And that’s a certain type of reading experience. But a poem like “Blues Done Red” reminds us that our reading experiences with poetry are always kind of forward and backward, recursive. Up-and-down and all over the place.

DK: Active. Active. Active. Yeah, that’s it. And the other thing is, every poem that has ever been in any book is *designed!* That left alignment is not the *absence* of design. That is design. That, to me, becomes this other question that I’m constantly going to be exploring. And I love these sorts of conversations because they give me the opportunity to say, “Well, you know that’s design, too!” And that the procedures, the conventions under which we read, are inherited and taught. You forget that reading a left-aligned poem of regular

stanzas, consistent-length stanzas... your knowledge of how to read that, the processing that your brain undertakes to say, “What the fuck do I do? Oh, there, that’s what I do,” happens so fast because of years of training. But it still happens. It’s not natural. It happens because of pedagogy. And the way I thought about this, especially with *The Black Automaton*, was to remind the reader that reading is a process and it requires an activity. And that your ability to determine what’s happening, when it’s happening, may be freer with the poem that looks like this, or maybe not. But that whole idea of making meaning that we’re constantly wrestling over when we read poems—that is a part of the argument. Like, “Well, how are we making these stanzas?” This stanza follows this stanza and that creates the possibility for a certain kind of meaning. But many of us will read a poem, and if there are parts of it that are obscure to us, we don’t necessarily throw the poem away. We go, “OK, well, I get stanza one. Stanza two, I’m not sure. Stanza three, all right, I’m back.” So there’s this gradual coalescing and then that can change later. I think that what those flowchart poems especially do is direct you into a reading experience so that then you come to realize, “Oh, I don’t *have* to do it this way.” And I like that kind of reminder. I like putting a certain measure of agency

back into the hands of the reader. And the opportunity to enact that at a live reading (to say, “I’m taking Jeff from the back row, and this is Jeff’s reading of “The Black Automaton”)—I just do that, and become this sort of automaton that’s there to deliver that reading. The impact that that has at readings tends to be really interesting. The conversations that I have after I do something like that, like doing a Q&A or just afterward, really open up remarkable chances to evangelize and to problematize my own ideas. We can’t ever be so sure of ourselves, right? We always have to do something that kinds of goes, “It’s exactly *this*—except when it isn’t.”

TT: Except for those times when I’m all shook up about it.

DK: That’s when it’s different!

TT: That’s when it’s different! Let’s hear another poem. Let’s evangelize and problematize another poem.

DK: Exactly. Since we’ve talked a lot about my daughter, I’m going to read the poem that I wrote most expressly for her. It’s called ““I Have a Penis! Mama has a Penis!””

“I Have a Penis! Mama has a Penis!”

a song in me of my daughter’s wayward penis,
twin to her brother’s stolid one. gone
on its hero’s wanderings, audacious penis!

it’s nautical, my daughter’s penis,
a craft of sail, propeller, or oar,
madcap ship of the frothy bath sea penis!

it’s chthonic, my daughter’s penis,
unseen mine car of the dank dydee ore,
in the brimstone stony shit caves deep penis!

twin to her brother’s staid one, her sly penis
sways like wry rye down by a briarpatch, brown
cackling rabbit penis. *my penis,*

my penis! she shouts, grinning at her denim,
the wee shorts’s waistband’s pink bow knotting
a nothing finger: remember your penis penis!

like a balding friar, I murmur vagina! vagina!
the v’s open scissor, the a’s snipped shut.
but her impossible hydra penis sprouts
anew two at a time! rockets to the front
like fighter jets, Chief Master Sergeant penis!

I have a penis! mama has a penis!
she hollers. how her penis colonizes
and occupies! conqueror, liberator penis!

I teeter at her swelling ranks
and slip upon the blood slick wake
panting vagina . . . vagina . . .
the word, red with cockamamie menace.
my tongue, red as a teacher’s pen is.

AFTERWORD

—CM BURROUGHS

Never has pleasure been better offered to the reader—at least if he appreciates controlled discontinuities, faked conformities, and indirect destructions.

—Roland Barthes

I bring Roland Barthes's *Pleasure of the Text* with me to this afterword. Barthes describes a kind of literature (one that Beatty, Day, and Kearney write into/into being) that is architected through rigorous experiments of forms and feelings. He calls the experience of such texts *bliss*. Beatty, Day, and Kearney agitate conventional (I'll call it post-industrial) order, break the self and the Other (as in, *break in the case of emergency*), and capture for readers an experience of dangerous and endangered bodies. You'll have found those qualities in these interviews: the writers describe their idiosyncratic verses/bodies as not sitting, as not sitting still, and there is the great extent to which these writers

are bound to the mass/mess of the body. Tony Trigilio phrases this as "the everyday dangers of the body." Here's the thing: readers' comprehension of *pleasure* cannot happen unless there is an ordering construct. Consider the key provided to a topographic map. The key *here* (and I mean in the interviews *here*) is Trigilio's electric listening and reflex toward empathic speech. I consider him a docent in this open field. Let me push that further—he is the docent in this *possible* field. I clarify from *open* to *possible*, because there is a willing kinesia and trust that develops in conversations like these, providing opportunity. Trigilio does not converse with expectation or intent, but with trust that the course will be worthwhile—all because he has discovered writers and writing of *such worth*. The interviews here and those yet to be recorded make me/make me love/make me love the trials of constructing verse. Read again and again these voices. Understand, with me, *bliss*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

—TONY TRIGILIO

Special thanks to Evan Kleekamp for his transcriptions of these interviews from their original audio format. Evan also served as a sound editor for the podcast while he earned his MFA in Creative Writing, Poetry at Columbia College Chicago, where I teach, and I'm grateful for his technological acumen. Deep gratitude to CM Burroughs for her afterword. CM's own poems confront many of the same questions of body, space, and cultural conflict that are vital to the work of Beatty, Day, and Kearney, and she was my absolute first choice to compose the afterword. Huge thanks to Andy Fitch.

AUTHOR BIOS



Jan Beatty's fifth full-length book, *Jackknife: New and Selected Poems*, will be published in 2017 by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Her last book, *The Switching/Yard*, was named by *Library Journal* as one of 30 New Books That Will Help You Rediscover Poetry. Other books include *Red Sugar*, *Boneshaker*, and *Mad River*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize. Beatty directs the Creative Writing program at Carlow University, where she runs the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops and teaches in the MFA program.



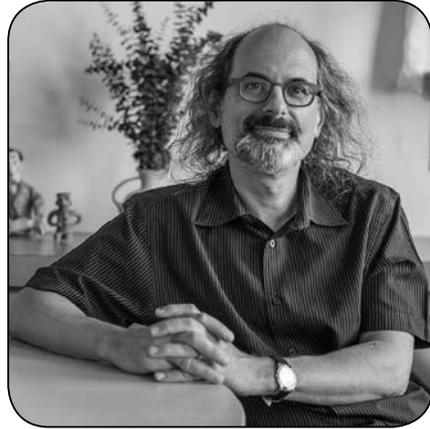
Meg Day is the 2015–2016 recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Travelling Scholarship, a 2013 recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and the author of *Last Psalm at Sea Level*, winner of the Barrow Street Poetry Prize and the Publishing Triangle's Audre Lorde Award. Day is an assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at Franklin & Marshall College and lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



Publisher's Weekly called **Douglas Kearney's** collection of writing on poetics and performativity, *Mess and Mess and*, "an extraordinary book." His *The Black Automaton* was a National Poetry Series selection. *Someone Took They Tongues* collects three of his opera libretti. Fence Books will publish *Buck Studies* in late 2016. He has received a Whiting Writer's Award, residencies/fellowships from Cave Canem, The Rauschenberg Foundation, and others. Raised in Altadena, California, he lives with his family in Santa Clarita Valley. He teaches at CalArts.



CM Burroughs is assistant professor of Poetry at Columbia College Chicago. Her first book is *The Vital System*. Burroughs has received commissions from the Studio Museum of Harlem and the Warhol Museum to create poetry in response to art installations, and has been awarded fellowships and grants from Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, the Djerassi Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Cave Canem Foundation.



Tony Trigilio's most recent collection of poetry is *Inside the Walls of My Own House: The Complete Dark Shadows (of My Childhood), Book 2*. His other books include, most recently, *White Noise*, and, as editor, *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments*. He plays in the band Pet Theories and teaches poetry at Columbia College Chicago, where he is the interim chair of the Department of Creative Writing.



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