

Memory Cards: from Thomas Traherne Series

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ



MEMORY CARDS:

FROM THOMAS TRAHERNE SERIES

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#39

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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PREFACE

It was John Ashbery who introduced me to Thomas Traherne. In the early 1990s, I learned that Ashbery, while he was writing *Three Poems*, read Traherne's meditations on the advice of his therapist. Traherne's short prose meditations, composed in "centuries" in the seventeenth century, weren't published until nearly five hundred years later. I was more critic than poet at that time, so I wrote a short article about Ashbery's uses of Traherne, how prose poetry invites intertextuality, how Ashbery's intertextuality represents "an anti-psychological way of thinking about the self." "I am implicated into the text as into a mirror, or a film of my own life as a critic," I wrote, "I see the texts that I see because they have become a part of my own spiritual and intellectual memoir." Or, translated back into Traherne: "And as in many Mirrors we are so many other selves, so are we Spiritually Multiplied when we meet our selves more Sweetly, and liv again in other Persons."

For many of the last 15 years, I've been writing my own "anti-psychological" memoir, *Memory Cards*. During much of that time, the poems have been nearly as obsessed with fact as with anywhere fact

might lead. Fact can be an unkind and unforgiving muse, as it tends to pull short of truth. I have come to want, not what Joe Harrington calls the “the forced optimism of American culture,” but a realm more spiritual than factual. Whereas I was happy with meaning early in the project (historical, cultural, simply narrative), I’m now looking to see beyond fact, or *into* it with some clarity.

So the poems’ openings, which first came directly from a day’s random events (2000), then morphed into random lines from favorite poets (2010), now come from spiritual texts. I wrote a series of cards based on Dogen’s writings in 2013. Dogen is wonderfully generative; his writing is both blunt and mysterious, almost always poetic (in nearly every sense one can imagine). I took phrases and sentences from his work as the openings to my prose poems.

After the Dogen series, I wanted to find another spiritual text to work through. I sniffed at St. Ignatius, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, other of the mystical texts I read like candy back in my early- to mid-twenties. I had misplaced Traherne, probably giving that blue hardback book of mine to the library book sale. (My house is small.) So I got a kindle version of his *Centuries of Meditations* and got to work (play?) with them. The fit has often been uneasy. While during some stretches of working through his meditations in sequence, I have happened on passages that seemed exactly to fit my circumstances, at other times, the devotional language is difficult to appropriate. This difficulty gets more extreme as

I get higher in number—the later in the book, the more drenched with Christ’s blood it gets. I use smaller and smaller bits of text, and nearly always misuse his words toward other meanings than he would ever have intended.

My desire now is to mix the poetry of fact with the poetry of attention. Attention is a spiritual and a political act. Even as the objects of Traherne’s devotion don’t exactly match mine, the devotional character of his work offers the promise of compassion, even when compassion can’t heal what is most wounded in our culture. In the meditations I’ve chosen to include here, these wounds include homelessness, endless American wars, and losses closer to home: a mother, a cat. These are my devotions.



MEMORY CARDS

An empty book is like an infant's soul. An empty soul cannot be realized. To realize is to render. What portion of soul is lost to hanging men, to torture's inefficiencies. What portion of loss nets the pain of broken legs, forced to stand on wet concrete. "Who authorized the pain meds?" the president asked. Questions are rhetorical that are meant to be answered otherwise. He took that as an order. Torture, like the alphabet, orders elements with impunity. A before S before Z, leg before rectum before mouth. He said waterboarding was not as bad as fingernail pulling. He used the word "enhanced," not to mean penis but pain. There's rectitude in this, etiquette even. What you do in a small room with someone else is not ours to know. We might read it as a kind of love, were we not given the photographs. There is too much witness, too little testimony. The digital window owns no soul, has its own brute force. What I see changes me, not it. Truth remaindered: wind, palms, birdsong, weed-whacker drone.

—19 December, 2014

Things strange yet common, incredible, yet known.
 The prosecutor knew witnesses lied under oath.
 Witness 40's journal in looping, childlike hand
 placed her at a scene she could not have arrived at
 in three dimensions. The mystery is where the soul
 resides. Section 8 housing is full, so she lives behind
 the restrooms near the police station. They swept
 that area after the bill passed. He sat on an Ala
 Moana bench and asked the young man his name.
 The young man had sores on his legs. Offered him
 a ride, but the young man walked away. He was not
 a billable case. Someone was dressed in a heavy
 coat and hood on Beretania next to a shopping cart.
 Heavy Coat stared at a wall. When I walked back, I
 asked if Heavy Coat wanted a nut bar. It was a she!
 She looked French, her narrow, tanned or dirty face,
 round scholar glasses. No, no. There are choices we
 make, or are made. The short prayer pierces.

—20 December, 2014

*I will not by the noise of bloody wars and the
 dethroning of kings advance you to glory,* though
 there's plenty of that. Blood on the camouflage
 pants, blood on the pistol, blood on the seats,
 blood on the street, blood in the air, blood on the
 platform, blood in sentences, blood in our bodies
 soaked in rage. Light the wick and watch us burn.
 Let us confuse spirit for the literal word: call it
 revenge and torture it. Take its photo and put it
 on Instagram. Make a pun of Trump, or Garner. Be
 clever. Cleave us apart by category, transfix us with
 our selfies. Call for revolution on websites devoted
 to poems. Read the comment streams that wend
 their way around trees and rocks and broken plastic
 toys. Imbibe them, get drunk on their syllables. *I
 don't care what you think*, he wrote me back. Where
 back cannot go forth, can only confront. Back to
 square one, museum of our incapacities dressed as
 superpowers. How loud we are, and sad. He wasn't
 even who he claimed to be.

—21 December, 2014

The fellowship of the mystery that hath been hid.
 From a bridge in Kabul, addiction is spectator sport. "Some look with judgment, some with pity" on men in the riverbed below. The mystery is a net that catches. The mystery is the link between history and a syringe, between needle and the rush of floating above a bridge, passenger on Google Earth. A cyber wind transmits its mystery, but the word of the day is "redemption." There are no discounts, only discounting. Do not hold your nose against the soul. Do not wonder what it means in context, for there is none that forgives. The addicts "attract more attention than any other kind of suffering." A young man snaps photo of an elderly addict, asleep on the ground. One wonders what he'll do with it. The photo is abstract, cradled only by his phone. Can the phone forgive the boy, or the dying man? Is the mystery found in their fellowship, or in ours, readers of *The New York Times*, December 20, 2014?

—22 December, 2014

Till you can sing and rejoice and delight...as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world. The problem, she said, was not who has the power, but power itself. They put dog shit in front of his door and, when he fell sick, they took everything. He saw rifle sights in raindrops, which is not to say he saw raindrops, or that he deflected his gaze from the world. Did you see them, he asked a friend. Raindrop metamorphosis did not draw them closer. Gold does not bring the miser nearer to his twin. They took his books, his computer, his kitchen cabinets. Something about him had been unclean. To expel means to breathe out; it is your own breath you lose.

—2 February, 2015

Nor shall the air itself be counted anything even in wind you hear before it touches. Our sick cat sits on a maroon pillow; he can't hear the wind, though he feels us when we come home. Yesterday he tottered in from his sunny spot on skinny legs. We've started talking to him about the end, which is an end for him, but not for us. What does a cat know of mortality? Of the speeches we make before and after? Of the poems devoted to dying? "My brother should never have had a gun!" a woman yelled. More dead in one place than the sheriff had ever seen. Death is rarely non-violent; the cat knows that. Done slowly enough, it lingers like perfume in the carpet. We know us better as he dies. Take the brush and comb out his unkempt fur. Scratch his chin. He still likes it, so let him live.

—9 February, 2015

(Everyone hath in him a Spirit, with which he may be angry.) Write a poem in prepositions. Massage this "with" as "through" or "against." Meaning, withheld, magnifies. The message was for you alone, my friend writes, in all its bitterness. If I want to keep things quiet, I will. The thrush, this crisp Monday morning, doesn't answer to demands. Nor the honking egret, close cousin to regret. Regret postulates recollection, recollection the church basket in which you throw your change. Altar, alters. Where none finds. And what of the parentheses: are they sidelines or the field whose artificial dust rises when a player's foot lands on it? The stadium is parenthetical. We hold us to our containers, snuggle inside like the sick cat on Bryant's lap. His organs fail, but still he totters to the kitchen. We watch him constantly for a good sign. Await the years that grow inside parentheses. The hyphen is a flash drive that holds our photos in hock.

—16 February, 2015

Your enjoyment is never right, till you esteem every Soul. Our cat begs, though he cannot eat. He walks on rubbery legs to his litter box, then misses it. Tiles grow slick with his urine. The carpet hides his spots. The blanket stinks with food Bryant squirted in his mouth. He sits at the kitchen entrance and meows softly; I hear his breath across the room. I think of Saijo's bush bunny, the perfection of his dead body. Of the cat who left, then returned to die at home. This is the year of letting go, my friend suggests. Not renunciation, but something quieter. To give is to be generous; to give in is to enter without sound. My cat hears none of our cluckings. He wobbles onto the lanai, seeking his sunspot, or a taste of rain. He exits my sight, stage left. He hasn't given up yet, Bryant says. To give up is to go away.

—18 February, 2015
for Tortilla

Socrates: *"who would have thought there were so many things in the world which I do not want!"*
Our cat lurches a zigzag jig from maroon blanket to kitchen to carpet. Restlessness is a sign, I read. He propels himself toward the door, as if momentum were itself direction. It's raining, so he can't find his sun spot. He peers out the louvered window beside our shoes. I do not want him to die. I do not want him to live. I do not want for not wanting.

—20 February, 2015

It is very strange; want itself is a treasure. The cat still wants: water, food, a wobbly walk on the lanai. I don't want so much as I lack. "I can't eat for you," I said, before he began again to eat. Lack precedes want, but want contains little except lack. Bryant caregives, taking reduction for a new essence, abiding with it. My mother on her deathbed was past want or lack; all she did was breathe until she did not. The cat on his blanket has more volition than that. It's his volition that hurts, the quiet bend of his front leg and the slow collapse of his back. The man who'd had a stroke walked beautifully. It was not his walk but his want of walking that made it so, the odd circular motion of his one leg as it moved toward the floor, set itself down, began. Attention obliges us to love. I want his next step taken.

—22 February, 2015

This is very strange that God should want. Merriam-Webster pronounces the word "strange" for me, so I won't be. It's stranger, non-native; if there is God, he cannot be, except in not being strange. Shift pronouns—"he," "she"—to pull down infinity but a tad. "For Gad, for country, and for Yale," his campaign sign read. I don't remember if he won, but why should it matter? Someone sang Alice Cooper in response to her talk, but I read "sign," as if gesture could convey such sound. Silence is many things. Is cat on his blanket this Monday morning, eyes wet, still wanting water, food. He needs to know you'll let him go, the vet says; her animals respond to English and make their own mistakes. My son's eyes are dark with refusal, but this morning he scratched the cat's head before school. Nothing's simple, it's all lease-hold. Leases come due, and we let them go.

—23 February, 2015

Desire imports something absent: and a need of what is absent. The cat's eyes fill with mucus; what he sees he sees through film. Small children can't tell need from want, necessity from desire. The cat's desire is all necessity: his dish, the spot by the window when there's sun. Touch and taste were hands and lips; the class exercise turned to expressions of love. My son wears a bracelet with his girlfriend's name on it. I wear a ring on my left hand. Ruth Ann held a long dry leaf, ran it along the railing like a prayer wheel. What we hold sacred is at hand. I wipe out my cat's eyes with a Kleenex; he turns away, orange cheeks stained brown. We consider the ethics of feeding, the stain of wiping the cat's anus. There is no prince of this prom; we are equal citizens in the end-of-life.

—27 February, 2015

For all Eternity is at once in Him, both the empty durations before the World was made, and the full ones after. Between before and after is this last day. There's a round stain on my meditation cushion where the cat peed. It forms a perfect circle, a knot of black thread precisely at its center. A tuft of his orange fur shows at nine o'clock, a wisp of dead grass just past noon. There is no calendar for poems, I write, only artifice. But this day will end when the vet comes with her needle. These will be your traces, body elements, the odd fruits of your dying. In Lawrence, an admirer preserved William Burroughs's turd and put it on display. Matter matters, but not in that way. *Om mani padme hung.*

—28 February, 2015
For Tortilla, with love

Is this not a strange life to which I call you? The morning after death there's laundry to do, tiles to scrub, an absence to let be. Still each window frames his gaze. Yesterday he lurched to the lanai, wanting out. Bryant carried him to the flowerpot that holds rainwater. He set his left paw in it, put his head between dense leaves, drank. A last offer of chicken, refused. I tried to close his eyes after, but the muscles kept them open. His white whiskers lay on the blanket, his ears alert. Sound is not a stain to leave behind. Morning is quiet, except for birds and the rooster I startled. This is vigil to come after vigil's end. Vigilance is what we're called to, the presence that makes this present hurt. There is comfort in our clichés—the other side, the seeing again—and while I'll mark you down for them, today I drink them like water from Tortilla's pot.

—1 March, 2015

It was his wisdom made you need the sun. It was his goodness made you need the sea. So need comes after generosity, not before it. I remember everything you read, one student said, because it was all about loss. But her tears came of allergies. Small boy in a large piece of luggage in a Chiswick flat, laughing. And then something happened, he'd say. Now he holds my book up to FaceTime, wonders when he'd used that phrase. There'd be volcanoes and explosions and then something happened. To say I have my memories is not to say where they are. Not in luggage, not in the fire safe, not here. They are what I have while losing them. Our vet brought flowers with the cat's ashes, and a paw print in clay. Sangha knelt down, touched its impress. The mark is gift and grief, the gift of.

—6 March, 2015

No misery is greater than that of wanting in the midst of enjoyments, of seeing, and desiring yet never possessing. I thought we had that one covered, the envy that nests in desire, but cannot complete it. My interest is in what comes after, the mats of orange fur I place in a plastic bag, the yellow brush we threw away. Grief is habit-breaking; still we hold to grief as habit after. Puns are the worst form of humor, my mother said, adding one about nuns, then daring me to laugh. She failed to grieve, wanting habit to be what she had lost without losing it. She gave everything away, as if objects were memories, and then she lost those. She didn't recover from her grief; it left her. She'd still make an occasional remark on the weather. It's cold today, and we're getting a new tub. Cast iron, but fragile, Louis says.

—9 March, 2015

Had we not wanted we could never have been obliged. A month of visitations: seated in my red chair, I felt a blur at the periphery of my left eye. A small gray rat sat in the living room, his fur sleek and clean. He vanished, like the others. We're obliged to those we want to see, even when they come in other bodies and leave again without them. The shells of their bodies litter our rooms, exposed to the air and us. Crawl inside: they are camouflage, armored personnel carrier, barrier against all the anger there is. We enter them like empire, beholden to what it inhabits. It takes courage to buy vegetables, to walk down a street, to stand inside a building. I'm glad you came, but please don't come again.

—20 March, 2015
for (but not to) Brian Turner

It can enjoy in another, as well as enjoy him. The pronoun is a robot; it gives us gender, as it offers us something to do. My student didn't know that "is" comes from the verb "to be." Depends on how you define being. She makes an altar, prays away the voices in her head (except those she recites to us), gives herself away. "Why teach a book that you hate?!" Refrain requires disambiguation, unless repetition stops us. He made typos in his handwriting: "extemity" without the "r." Another makes a litmus test for his friends. I remember that blue line, miscarriage. Her son wanders the house, turning off lights and television. We lock the doors against their wandering. Her Alzheimer's was better for me than for her. The switches kept getting flipped. Flip your lid, she'd say. Flip your lid.

—22 March, 2015

They had less need to see the one, than we to see the other. "The smell of urine permeated the air, and blood from a visible foot wound had been washed into a pool on the ground with a discarded Band-Aid," a real-estate broker said. The Angel of Commodity came down to wrap her wings around the pavilion and sell us sunscreen. The Angel of Desire came next, offering unobstructed ocean views and the scent of tropical flowers. The homeless, we're told, are happy in their lifestyles; they take drugs, after all. Sell blinders to the tourists. Do not let them leave their armored hotels; they might see a man by Costco clutching a black book to his chest, or another whose sign reads: "Hungry Vet, God Bless." Do not let them witness, lest they testify to Waikiki's "shame." A row of tents lines the Kalihi stream, punctuated by red shopping carts caught in mud. A man stands on the bridge, blue fishing net in hand. It's Easter, so let them die; see if they rise. Let the green flash assign the holy ghost his next meal. Better yet: ship them all to the Big Island.

—4 April, 2015

The Cross is an intersection of streets in Kaka`ako, is a line of tents in Kalihi, is He`eia stream beside the man on the bike's hutch. A bottle dipped in the stream was all I saw beneath his tarp, old white guitar laid on top. Intention is the mother of empathy, of which there was none. The man with the white guitar plays things we want not to see. He plays for an audience of egrets, of passing trucks pulling boats, of workmen on the bridge. He plays for taro farmers in the valley. He plays for the invasive mangroves, the mountains we cannot remember origins of, the point of land the dead leaped from. He's the still point a surveyor might use to mark the boundaries we've made of this land. He's the story for which there is no arc, no denouement. Ignore him: he's no threat to your commerce or your joy.

—5 April, 2015
Easter Sunday

O that I could taste it beneath the gall and vinegar!
"Deux gaules," in the language of resistance, whispered the fisher of men. He spoke so slowly I understood his French. When Mimi bore her litter of kittens, he drowned them in a bucket. Kittens wrestle at my feet, soft and sharp, like alternating currents. Cardboard on concrete makes a Chinatown bed. Her grandparents dealt in vegetables and porno. What to do with all those reels? Why am I surprised at their white hair? We're told too many penalties will render the laws void, so go easy on those who live in tents by the canal. The homeless are pure cost, lines heavy with gravity. One man sweeps the sidewalk beside his tent; I am leaving a Thai restaurant, where I talked to the author of *The Bodhisattvas of Thrown Away Things*. Mother and aunty carry a pole laden with old clothes and a bunch of bananas. My student asked me what I think "the the" means. A politics of person not idea, of love without absorption, of the simple word. Good night, men; good night, kittens.

—24 April, 2015

But this is small. Exhaustion multiplies. Street theater, an empty stadium. A player throws a baseball high in the stands where no one retrieves it. The old warehouse was where one vendor's father collected unemployment; today the vendors didn't bark. No drinks, no popcorn, no cracker jacks. Just absence of riot in absence of person. As if. I told my student not to use the word "just," but it's just the word for what's missing. Freddy Gray dying in the back of a van stopping one time more than we knew. So much we don't know, the *not* peeling like lead paint from walls of apartment blocks. That was not spinal surgery: a not cinder block crushed his larynx. It's his not speaking we hear. He wrote about a fragile door. Ours to occupy this limen, or sidewalk whose cracks mark meaning that cannot matter. What is just surpasses it.

—30 April, 2014

Thou hast made me the end of all things, and all the end of me. "My end is my beginning" proposes that my purpose is to start my engines and then put on the brakes. Separate that desire from an adoration of origins, as if they were unsullied land, pure in their lack of contact. Contact me on my cell. Cells are ends to a means, the tiny houses we assign those who do us wrong. My head is full of them. I invite bees in to make honey; confinement can be liquid sweet. Highway through which renewable cells thread like wings of a stage, or over which hang small roofs of solar cells. There are cells in the blood, but also in what we adopt, a place inside the place apart. They course our veins like rubber ducks in the canal, bobbing for charity. Beside the canal, the homeless raise their tents. They too will be razed by the city. Its hive mind cannot conceive of sight as benefit or balm. Abstraction keeps us safe.

—6 May, 2015

Whatsoever ye do unto him ye do unto Me. Conceptualize font, italic, quotation, capital. Assume you and I are mirrors installed in each other's thumbs, that we ride the bus to work and see first passengers asleep, left eyebrows cocked against gravity. An apostrophe presumes possession or contraction. The birth of the sentence often depends on contractions or on sounds that travel over periods. Who knew it's easier to throw a deflated ball than a hard one? That what we leave out becomes a mark that tells us what isn't there? That anger fills the space between question and no answer? Tell me where in your body you feel it, what happens when you express it. It happens for me at the corner of Makahiki Way and South King Street the night Bill 6 passes the City Council. A middle-aged man sweeps the sidewalk outside the tent that he and his wife put up at dusk. No person shall sit or lie.

—7 May, 2015

Sweeter to me than the honey and the honeycomb. Too sweet makes sour: we dress our anger as adoration. I cannot trust what does not doubt. An 18-wheeler crashed on the highway, its cargo millions of bees. Bees are dying and we don't know why: pesticides or sickness or long commutes. Migrants die in leaky boats, their positions like stars in some clusterfucked sky. Green paint, a woman's mouth, an arm cast over the side. I see so little from my sweet cell. I want to learn to love this earth without laceration. I want to punch my hand through the lens without breaking it. I want to cup a bee in my palm, place my arm around an arm. Adoration's nothing without clean water.

—16 May, 2015

Henceforth I will more admire Thee by Thy sufferings. When the plural of suffering is not itself. The “s” is not superfluous or fluid as this morning’s rain, helicopter buzz behind gray cloud(s). When is the plural singular? Radhika yelled “Traffics!” from the back seat. Next to Hotel Street, a man sits on a slab of cardboard, resting his back against brick; his clothing is as white as his beard. Twenty paces past, I see his eyes in a woman’s face, turned toward the triangular park. It’s one thing to see, another to be witnessed. My gaze, gaza’d.

—17 May, 2015

I confess I can see, but I cannot moderate, nor love as I ought. Walking through Chinatown at night, I feel love, but can’t know where to send it. If love is an act, I don’t. If love could course down Hotel Street like an electric pulse, I’d need a crowd. “That’s Harry’s cousin,” Lau said of the man on the sidewalk at Longs, his body thrashing, pointer finger cutting at the air. He nodded hello to Lau’s brother Sam. When we walked back, coffees in hand, the man still surged in place. In this cast of characters, it’s we who wear the masks. My student placed five on the table, wore one as she read her poems. She who needs none collects them. The city is most intimate where people sit or lie on cardboard or blanket, as if an earthquake tore buildings into dollhouses. I cut my doll’s hair until there were only stubs. That was the day I swore her off.

—19 May, 2015

Thou lovest everyone wholly as if him alone. The lip of Pearl Harbor is covered with tents, men fishing next to “don’t eat the fish” signs. (It’s a Superfund Site.) A white-haired white guy with camouflage backpack emerges from a rest room, fills an empty liquor bottle with water, lingers. He sits down to watch five or six local guys grilling meat, their truck shaking with bass lines. One in four persons cited for sitting and lying on Waikiki Beach is a tourist. The girls on spring break vow never to return. “Persons lingering or remaining on stream bank areas may be swept away by sudden floodwaters, may accidentally fall into the stream, or may urinate, defecate, bathe or otherwise contaminate the stream waters.” I wonder at the word “linger.” *To remain alive while gradually dying.*

—30 May, 2015*

*Some quoted language comes from Bill 46, before the City Council this coming Tuesday.

This body is not the cloud, but the pillar assumed to manifest his love unto us. I found a notebook of Radhika’s early English phrases. In it, I said the word “Buddha” as I pointed to Buddha’s head, and she replied “Mouth!” She pushed a toy car towards me, said “Buddha!” The “e” changes “a” from car to care. Compassion’s a machine that sounds our voice, pre-linguistic and post-industrial. To hand out is to act. I took the styrofoam box in my two hands and placed it beside a man sitting on the sidewalk. It felt like ritual, like obeisance, too little too late and yet. If he sits in front of a business, he can be arrested. If he sits across the street from a business, he’s subject to a sweep. A subject is agent to an action. In the past tense, it’s disabled, swept. Oh grandfather Joseph, was that you on Hotel Street, or do you still somewhere walk the streets of Pittsburgh? Your signed copy of Hamlet sits on my shelves. I knew you only through my mother’s words, which were not kind.

—5 June, 2015

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AUTHOR BIO



Susan M. Schultz has lived in and worked in Hawai'i since 1990. She is author of a critical book, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, and several books of poetry and poetic prose. Most recently, Singing Horse Press published *Dementia Blog, Memory Cards: 2010-2011 Series* and *"She's Welcome to Her Disease": Dementia Blog, Vol. 2*. Vagabond Press published *Memory Cards: Dogen Series* in their Decibels Series. Schultz founded Tinfish Press in 1995. Tinfish is now in its twentieth year of publishing experimental poetry from the Pacific.



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