The Landscapes Were in My Arms

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THE LANDSCAPES WERE IN MY ARMS

by

SARA RENEE MARSHALL

B.A., University of Colorado, 2006

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in English Literature-Creative Writing

Department of English

2013
This thesis entitled:
The Landscapes Were in My Arms
written by Sara Renee Marshall
has been approved for the Department of English

Julie Carr

Noah Eli Gordon

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Marshall, Sara Renee (M.F.A., English-Creative Writing)

The Landscapes Were in My Arms

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Julie Carr

This work concerns itself with questions of domesticity, human contact with the present and future tenses, the promise, and the concept of abstraction through ruminations on expressionist and color field painting. It employs both lyric and prose modes and forms in tandem. Its central question is, perhaps: if the subject places themselves in or projects their subjectivity onto the abstract, does it remain abstract? What implications could this transposition of subjectivity have on promises, abstracted by the future tense and yet concrete in terms of the materiality of language? In this work, both the house and paintings are primary sites for investigation.
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I will confront you somewhere where you aren’t the order, aren’t in order...

Alice Notley

The house is a burden to the weak cyclone,
You are under a tent where promises perform
And the ring you grasp as an aerialist
Glides, no longer.

Barbara Guest
I. THE FUTURE, A PHRASE

1

We’re outside for this image, hugging the hedge, the only green known to dusklight.
It’s neither a quick dissolution nor a negligible mist. Our pictures echo in, echo out: a
house, a cradle trimmed in static. You’re standing before a diaphanous rampart
draped indifferently over horizon. Naively I call this home.
If a house, then—seemed like a probable stage for expectation. But with nothing obstructing the sun, still a serrated dark overtook half the yard. Once you yelled so sharply, I holed up shaking in another room, which is to say: I would have held vigil anywhere; spiders sneak in through the easement; it’s still winter. Even by the hot draft of the vent I folded my hands like prayer between my thighs. Your sighs heap. Fewer sentences seem available. Heads cocked up like the roof held off a whole swarm of possibilities. You look over me, pausing at my eyes, pausing at my mouth. Imagine brighter green like a fresh stem, lusher pink, my profile struck with a little noir. This could be another moment. A new wind come through to stir what we’ve stopped noticing is felled all over the floor.
I smear paint around on a page thinking
if I pull marigold apart from a flower
sense will stand more obviously
like a figure and its shadow
But how long can you stay on the beach sustaining raw joy in the sun with no plan for the afternoon? You once said “Fuck snorkeling,” or was it “Fuck Hawaii,” and during the movie, you’d better work too, or time’s just rolling off to the side, a coin you allow to get lost. Oddly, naked, all the rules change. I’m draped over your lap, my clothes draped over the clock, the blinds cutting off the month, all color, any goal.
The guests kept remarking on how settled we are—every lamp and book and painting in place. A house and a home. The good type of alarm in your abrupt kiss is one way to describe the distance. Privately I notice how your eyes spark when I take your purpose as my own, how you’re suddenly taller, like you’re looking down calmly on years from now. In here, you said, on our wrecked bed, you want surprise, which I hear as surrender. I'll pin you, yes, I'll be a branch crazed in wind. In this picture, you’d never recognize the heat-warped thistles on a bench just a few weeks away, these cries from those. No matter the steady tenor in your voice or your grip like an anchor on my waist, the past has its own triggers, its own speed. You can fire the gun yourself, but its kickback might still startle.
Everything reminds me—even grey paint on the walls—of a thousand choices that say the house is a thing we're growing. Our friends tell stories around the fire pit, the dog circles the yard, you string lights that bring out the fence, and what doesn’t reflect safety? Even improvising, dancers move soundly inside narrative. First, dead thing, then stem, wind coughing, wind fraying the neat body of the company, and suddenly a leg buckles, a real bruise blossoming on a knee. Accidents happen. What do you call harboring pleasure for the hope of a threat? A little street noise, an erratic breeze is nice; some doors we leave open, but fear staggers in.
I say *hymn*, and outside the music, like a river birch, you think yourself a bold building. If we were states, this would be called the right to crenellation: that shallow, cycloptic glance, how you speak yourself no closer than a stranger, or like an infant’s uninflected babble when they’ve just been fed.
Abstraction is imagined to be free
of figures but what is thinning green
spreading to a halo if not birth?

Midnight water blathers
on the causeway. Two bodies confuse their difference
and spawn the orange of sunlit organs

A field of leaking color is as naive
as blood paled by milk, as the bent figure,
turning figure, bare-breasted figure
resists a sitting portrait.
Suddenly the kids at the park are too young to languish under trees like this is Paris, which tells me there's a mid-course turn. My countenance gives away what I conceal, a brassy fissure. What is the house for: a time-lapse of sweat, a list of desires, a canon of accepted sentences. What is the house but a music I can't distinguish from my own singing. I'm just outside the door. The Rincons hum a familiar purple; the O'Briens wave; grackles start their distant fit. There's little I know but the song lifting from a now-estranged 45. I thought names were a good enough knot.
I wrote the dome of trees until they became real—a willed fortress against distance, that myth. In the machine age, Matisse said we must sustain impulse with intellect. So I dream long and hard about what unspeakable wind shoved me toward you, then what sent you years from now mapping use for rooms. First, children are a romantic name, and later, a hunger. I’m held in an unmoving green. You’re pulled from local light toward stars imagined through the leaves. You charter a ship, then try to understand what you had in mind.
II. IF I COULD SPEAK TO YOU, HELEN FRANKENTHALER

MOUNTAINS AND SEA

Kneeling on raw cotton duck
you loosed blue from chronicle
When the surface answered
you dragged the sea for a leg of iris
pitched fern-ragged mountains
If I could speak to you Helen
I’d say like you I hold everything I see
For months I’ve chanted

*The landscapes were in my arms*
Propped like a baby  borne
like a parcel?

Avowed adopted
clutched like facts?

Rendered
like a voice on the telephone?

No

Like a haunt moves
Rote dance
lopped from measure

Like fog
a roving mask estranges heads
from roots
WHAT RED SUGGESTS

Twombly's peonies rain, hung
up in mustard sky Yellow
jackets spear a cloud cluster

Oblong tumbleweeds lope
headlong bleeding
like he wondered could the air

swallow glass shards Whether little bits of
land flounce skyward I crane my neck
falling into it A miller's wings

rattle on the sill preparing to
outfly the dog's jaw Suddenly real
violence seems ordinary I shake

no to say yes
Juice from fruit hips gravity
draws rose canes against my eyelid closed
THE BAY

Whatever dilates
makes erotic
whatever is undark

The idea is to remove texture

A family of blues let
to swim soaked
to their limits

But land is a word a stake
pinned I king you
with every he magnetic flowers
flock to the shrine

One night I coaxed heat
from the desert
and let it be my blood Its pain
your namesake
STUDY IN GREEN

To a dredge of evergreens over the window
To a father who wakes up to wait for us
To Christmas rain around sleep in the Sound
It boils down
to seven hundred seventy-nine letters
To I love

*all the blood and piss and water in you*

Naked in a mirror onto our bed set adrift
To the Adriatic to the Aegean
*Don’t run away from me*

To twenty-seven distinct cities
To the right eye’s an aquamarine
left is an emerald

It boils down
to a small light enfolded in oranges
a hallway a plank

It boils down to a keyhole view of

little more than a little lace a bride going by
Sharpened on the wrong grief

Risk both good and wrong

rich and rutted and bottomless

What with a mother’s love

would I salve me with
CAUSEWAY

A softground train of red laced
from above or should I say before

How does the incidental stain
bring you to an exploded

heart playing a bridge
between threatening

ocean and ocean
LUSH SPRING

They call this tissue bleed  Accidents
lend themselves to landscapes

animals or the suffocating tangle
of just one color       Black strikes interrupt

flat green and blue pools
      like the continent cut itself
open       and is this a painting

a poem       or a sharp plummet
out of safety
I advance through a sea

with appetite  gold burning off me

I am thought

to be traveling in an envelope

without shores or bottom

“If you can find your way back

find your way back”

is a message marooned

in a book picturing Venus
III. SLEEP IS A STRANGER’S GLOVE

Moored in the 9th floor beneath hawks
circling train noise     Faint sound
smoked me out of bed to the shut door
shutting some more      Little body
tired receiver swaying in a black wave
sent from the coldest sleep
Blue-tongued     brought to the mirror
for a mismatched cinema
Lifting in an orange-eyed
glow lapsing down
night vision’s cool
decension I float in
torpor between here
and not here
I am no stranger
to this class of frightening things
This is the wrist of a woman
opening    Blue bled to
halos   interior mantling
An encounter between fauna
and vision some non-metrical
scratching on the screen
The dream now a fail-safe

excuse for what's born winged

yet ruthlessly in the stomach
Sleep is
a stranger's glove
and the dark comes

in Mice skitter and gnaw
through the wall into
my dream or sidelong pose

where ghost children march
toward a leaf trap a well of skeletons
Ash lilts My throat’s wrung

mute Everyone is passive
in a nightmare but
the menace
In a white wash

a loud spill of letters

I'm trying to get to the very end
to the point

    past the future

Not the picture

of the baby but the baby

I'm opening my arms for

from my seat on your lap
Some words
revolve into sleep Through-

composition of shadows
bobbing borne along
the night wall a zoetrope

I watch unattended
infants carried off
in a boat

    Fog-batten
weak vessel I drag
my face through vapor
to gauge a bowstring truss Taut

enough to bear me Without hands
every future stays
imprisoned
I sit a few blurry inches
from my bones        The heavens grow
less visible        Quiet heaps
A sliver of me
drugged in an orchard somewhere
lolling around
Could an incompetent body
revolt and hunt itself
Sleep
unfolds its
motherless children
Sleep is a stranger’s glove
and water rushes in

and in swims a worry
unlidding this soft orb

Any time a levy goes
there goes the myth

of a levy
IV. AFFECTIONATELY WE CALL THIS THE HOUSE

The last thing I am writing

is the house which was never

mine just a net catching

litter from the future

tense come apart
Three days dark

Three days cold aura
throbbing

Three days deafness at the bottom
of a well        Three days’ fast

Three seasonless
days departed
from this room
On a plane I forget
the season cold come at me

in private light
the family flickers bleeds

into the creek I'm deaf
in these unwelcome

remunerations I am years from
now disassembling

my children How will I
alone be a home
Let clouds make babies plump and dumb

Let clouds slacken and waver

on their tethers gather separate bundles

of the room in our arms

I'm already treading

thick water on a vacant street
Days are the door returning me
to the impasto I break into planes

Dead sage lain as a blanket
bottletrees filtered hung in the mid-ground

You said the air was pregnant

With what I’m so faint
by afternoon music

tips me over
Thirty one days I hang
nocturnes where your voice was
I dance moon
drugged a windmill slowing
I dance fog My gut leads me
from one corner to another How dead
is the grass I dance
hours coming a matchstick
collapsing face first
on wood I leap at the ceiling
How does the house rest
How is the heat I don't love
any light enough to eat
For thirty one days
I keep the legs up talk
about going on
I dance shrugs limply
on the tip of a thread
I never leave the earth
Thud of light hammered between my eyes
I am nowhere
that language can't find me
With increasing love
I press my mouth into the pillow starved for disappearance
I remember the green bed  our room
I'm held there  I remember our two lamps
I'm kept there  friezed in their light
The kitchen table where I'm held
across from you again and again
I'm kept there in the shower
with 8 minutes of hot water you soap up
my tits  I'm held here  I remember
where your clawing
bruised my ass  I'm held
there through the window to the yard
I remember  you pulled my pants down
fucked me there against the table
against the voice of the neighbor  I remember
Mary walked past our window
you held me  you asked
you asked how do you want to come  I climbed
on top of you  I held you
I remember  I held you
down and came once  twice  five times  I remember
in your office kneeling between your legs
to rub your cock to lick you  you kept me
between your thighs  I remember you
promised to stick your tongue in my cunt  I'm held
there where you asked what I was thinking

I remember I said you fucking me in the ass

I'm held there remembering

I thought of you fucking me pregnant
I'm there propped on your lap

where I came and came
So I return to a city I stopped in wax

There are only a few ways to finish light

I pat my pockets for a new tune

to an old town        soft yellow strokes

to miff the red       A kind of talk

made of fewer calls and more dim-lit dancing

Like a record skips    a score

of past lives call to us

as bruises concealed by clothes

Dusk sounds distract us to the porch

Look here    all that’s a photograph    The after-mortar

of a voice littered in this still life

Drowning is too coarse a word for an orchard

too dark to sprint in     These are the frames

we’re tilting for composition’s sake.
The history of industry tells me more than this archive of confession. My legs are forgotten against the wind of a train, nowhere and going. A train so fast it outpaces the tread of an eye. Gone from earth, the season, measured in machine rhythm.

You're not here. Work is not here, not the object but to chase a craving—the caveat of mystery spelled in dim meadow ambling off. Hope lusty as teeth remembered on my thigh. A riddled grave, a specter seizes the shoulders of Delacroix's orphan off screen.
I return to a place in which I have no stake.
I’m held *inside the between that is turning*: our house and the house I stand in now.

What’s left: a bicycle, a box of books, bags of clothes, a mobile writing desk, a painting of a small boy transposed over a meadow, who I’ve been calling William in my mind. I’m almost gone. Or lost anyway, drained out of every room. You watch me watching an estrangement.
It’s thrift that pulled my blood in line
Thrift pushed the house to the edge
of its wooden proxemics

But tucked in my periphery
the same frame over another range
a grain caught and threshed

fern undirected my voice
seized in the mesh of the microphone

The triggers won’t soften like a leash
dropped in the hallway
your wet limbs in butter-soaked grass
On loop, this play of modesty—you calling the house a pile of bricks. Forever the image of rectangles stacked without mortar, little figurines threatened beneath them. A dark stain back-lit by the traveling sun. I don’t know if it’s rising or falling, since this isn’t episodic but remote. When the little girl I was thinks of me I’m driving. She’s half right about the picture revising itself. Out of nowhere a steeple traumatizes this skyline, but landscape is so wrongly fed by the drama of devotion.
What the history of the house
helps you assume
with its long sure arrow: I’m another
root for the same agonizing
blooms to cloy and orbit.
I’m the short hallway
to a kitchen. Or I’m moored
in the dim kitchen of the poem—
the wound torchlight
starts to lick. A keen reader
knows whoever’s cropped
from the photograph
returns with their back turned,
reinventing the house
anecdotally. Like a scavenger
circling could herald the rot.
What wouldn’t the narrative love
to prove with its daylight;
the golden yard, glowing absently
with what I buried there, keeps
standing in. Standing for what. Irony?
Memory’s fond decorum emblazoned
before the curtain. The house
I’d love to upturn, to pull
by its hair back to its roots.
Maybe, like a ghost, like the view from a train, *that* life must pass through *this* one.

Cut and strained through my sleep, the candle’s flame loses its untrained body eventually. I send one eye on an errand: to memorize the crazed anemones sunned onto the lake. But where there is light, there is the chromatic trick interrupting.

Blood fucked out of me flowering on the sheets. *That won’t stop me,* you said. So I sleep with my head at the foot of the bed. I want to flush the luster from narrative.
I want to be right here, but the fact is do I. Here, a draft of winter air beneath the table, a plot of white sun above. I read the mail. The letters are here.

*I want you to write the tulip trees until they become real.*
I saw them first by their fallen leaves—so like the outstretched palm of Shiva. Sickly yellow like a tainted crayon except for a last memory of green. Brown in their veins and their edges blotted brown like dirty fingerprints. Not brittle, water-robust and flat, big as my small hands. When I found their tree, I saw its top rose higher than all the common oaks in the cemetery: a keeper, a maker. I’ve heard in their waxing season they flower big clay cups. This tree canopied a few chalky gravestones, saintly in their contrast. Its crown was wide and red-touched; its middle branches leaning out wider still, orange; the low leaves, matte, waxy yellow. I pressed my forehead on its trunk—something like a *hello*—wanting its breath or a communication. We’re always looking for signs, stuttering away from pin-drop focus on the sun’s salve in fall air, a sense of the water’s nearness. The blue jays dropping out of branches to scavenge leaves, tobacco-nut bark. A tree as a totem in the abstract memorial itself, an exclusive home to howling grief, which is another word for love.

This is just as here.

*A letter which can wither, a learning which can suffer and an outrage ...*
How to say

you are safe

in the temporary

is a latch
Sometimes an avenue itself is the masterpiece. In France gold arrests the street like a sequin wheeling its shine around. We translate form and light by how heavily they weigh on the eye. Cezanne tells the volume of a building in negative silver on a black lake. Seurat's planed angles, smeared bodies at the bathhouse. I wonder: what is the distance between the real here and the here I wake up fighting off. On the lit edge of our block we counted quail in their parade. Is this a composite present or grey debt languishing on half my bed. The face, too, a jagged ground of impression.
I’ve cut to the street to sidestep magnolias
blowing apart. When heat tilts out,
I curl toward pictures
fooled together in the mind
Enough metaphorizing. The boat—

well, it never was. Think like
two gallops, a music glued
to running, I’ve gone so stranger
but your free hand still types
what I’d call a dead word. Green
everywhere, April. What a sick joke
on bereavement.
Every morning, I come into my kitchen or this kitchen wears the ghosts of yours. I calibrate at the stove—the scene sucked furtively toward a field usurped by a pinhole. I move my head back and forth; I inhale cautiously. I want to shake the house out of the air, open somewhere greener. There’s the grainy picture we make with words and the picture hovering ambient as arms. I’m made there, hand-guided into the day. If I rewind, I risk. I revive the same little death. As if new light alive on the wall doesn’t deliver enough cruelty.
How could I know where
what brought you
takes you: the cipher
stoppered inside the moment
of arrest you slung
from a window catching breath

You're back
in ambered afternoons
by the hidden lake to dream
the trophy of an obstinate boy
up to the light now coughing
pities along dumb rope now
whispering cobwebs

Affectionately
we call this the house like cold cement
is good enough to hold us up
like what’s fostered survives
outside its cribbed premise
Still when running
there is the fact of a child

*it is a spectacle*  *it is a binding accident*

I try to burn
with my eyes ripped
paper feathering in deciduous air
A friend tells me she dreamt of you in uniform with mangled hands. She wondered what could it mean, and I said, “That’s familiar.” As much déjà vu as your real, incomprehensible crying on my lap. I still picture you wheeling around in your office chair, talking on the telephone. Who are you talking to? I think you’re disfigured in a dream because I keep my voice down. More and more I wake up, and that’s the end of the story. Some June from now I’ll ask myself what was sad enough to walk all the way to the ocean.
One name keeps
polishing itself all over
the place and so what?
Starts sloughing The last
pictures burrow deep in the yard

I say something
about noon’s ripe gold That’s evidence:
my blood unsleeved from
laws the lock unlocking promoted
to music So the month goes

grey call it a dent
When the rain
rain And what might pretty
when drowned
isn’t lost in the Willamette
The Woman in White folds her arms like a decision. She’s as real as Picasso gets, though her hair breaks into ethereal cartoon. When I say his portraits worshipped a mythical midday, I’m not exactly finding you in the painting. She’s not the elsewhere. This is the elsewhere—the rope of tightening air, bouquets of hidden lilac, but enough green evidence to keep walking. What’s so imaginary about her disappointment, smoked out of bed, caught in her nightdress.
One hundred-eighty days—blunder
fly-trapped in the affect
from a song or the crabgrass a lure
into the well Every locked-in sight
a declension every song a sheet
pulled to my throat A fallow voice
doesn’t mean I’m not in tune just lifted
wending far from your ear

One invisible instant
fog stops loitering There
glowing hundreds of lamps rigged to the pines
the beauty of the roof Look you can’t
loathe the street for who’s never lived there
Let’s just say
I cleared books off
half my bed   I’m not rouged
or slain or harp-plucked
on the hilltop but I don’t feel
nothing     Here and there
Briscoe’s body skimming
above the breach     I can be fucked
and criminally distant
in the woods   some call distant
what is the fling with a long-gone organ
I’m thinking of a new religion dispassionately
devoted to photographs, where the trick
robs the bluff in your eye     That’s how
we lived     between word
and bond     every turn due dark
Am I most alive in knowing
or unknowing having or gripping
my stomach in service of what
wants to blush there
Following an adage like *leave to come home*, I’m afraid I drive all the way to Nebraska. Here I am tiptoeing through a subzero prairie. You try to pressure the air, but what hands do you have left? What knots up in this winter from the last? What charismatic sob I sidestep, what desert clothes I have I leave at home. On a street you’ve never seen, clouded in breath, I lick someone else’s lips like the antidote. This is a wayfinding, and I forget the cold when I can’t place a single landmark in the dark.
Snow everywhere

    looked like a fine place

to lie down    I read your letter
to me in a poem    real as magnolia
lurking in your collar    I guess
I’ll drive around a while
to wring out the tremor

I’m as upright in this
longing as I am clawed
by the dream of the house
warming me into its dark

Red letter    red unraveling
    you to a door is a hoax
where the moon is
a mirror on either side
I know this is a witnessing of what was

and what is no longer       and so

is a long drawn breath

expelling

a small sound that goes on in sound alone

EBB’s work continues to teach me about how emotional intelligence can be the backbone of a poem’s success and difficulty. Also, her feminism and, frankly, her attitude toward masculinity are the fount of influence from which every feminist poet, including me, have inherited a sensibility.


If I can synthesize my myriad lessons from Julie, I’d say that she continually teaches me about staying in touch with the body and its music in order to bring their expressions and movements into the poem.


This collection reminds me that a book can comprise many modes and still feel unified by style. Carson moves with ease between an imagined interview with Sappho on late night television to considering etymological evolutions that trouble the feminine in history. Her leaps teach me how to leap successfully—in content, formal mode, history and intellectual rhymes.


This book reminds me that sometimes freedom unfurls inside constraint. Also, I return to this book to learn about momentum and how impacting simplicity can be when you have something meaningful to communicate.


Whether or not he’s approaching the ekphrastic, Fernandez has an ekphrastic eye—something I too hope for in my poems. He writes with a decadence and lushness in service of aesthetic beauty, bringing the poem somehow nearer to the aim of visual art. Further, I admire that sensuousness approaches the status of religious devotion in his poems. They are bodily yet abstract and almost overwhelmingly pleasurable.

Field, Thalia. Point and Line.

This book helped me solidify the idea that collage, and in some cases parallel or ancillary narrative, are inherent to postmodern narrativity. Also, Field’s poetics seems to suggest that the feminine is still finding—or rather writing—its place inside or next to masculine forms.

I return to Graham’s poems to think about compression, economy, careful treatment of the short line, but more so to be reminded of how the poem can communicate an intricate emotional intellect inside a compressed framework.


For months I slept with her *Collected* on the other half of my bed, reading from it daily. Guest reminds me to stretch my concept of what is allowed in the poem. She’s taught me about strangeness and the value of what might remain unresolved or unknown even to me in the poem. I appreciate jaggedness, asymmetry and the oddity of ever-shifting phenomenology in her work.


Hejinian has taught me more about how the poem is political than any other writer. I have her to thank for the idea that the poem is an act of opening, the beginning to an inquiry.


H.D. defines a feminist poetics for me; feminism underpins and shapes her vision of the very small and particulate object world, as well as large scale socio-cultural problems, ie: the state, war, social engagement, historicity, etc. She rescues qualities of the feminine not only from obscurity but from dirtiness in order to redeem them.


This book offered an ongoing fundamental education in the foundations of Romanticism, modern painting, presence, the sublime, abstraction and an expressionist vocabulary.


All of Loy’s writing excites me in its insistence on representing the grit of the embodied feminine. Also, her poems seem like a private language to communicate the phenomena of love—both spiritual and embodied. The work of understanding that language is uniquely pleasurable, and I hope to exploit a vocabulary in a similar way.

While I love Notley for her rawness, I love Morrison for her precision. Rusty so delicately and deliberately makes complicated and poignant thinking in her poems. It’s as if she caresses an idea, and a language develops in service of that idea and that idea alone. Further, Rusty’s treatment of loss and its felt experience in the body is exemplary.


I’ve inherited and continue to aim for a sharp edge in the voice in my poems akin to the voice in Notley’s *In the Pines*. This voice embodies feminism and takes its narrative to the frontier of feminist stakes: death, violence toward and destruction of the feminine, the problem and enactment of writing the feminine divorced from masculine interference.


There’s a Romantic lushness and music in this poem—the emotion is dense in both the language and its content—that moves me like almost nothing else. Novalis’s ideas of love, the feminine, the body as a spiritual vessel for pleasure are basically devotional. In spite of modernity, these poems are what I want to feel. That is, they are also what I want my audience to feel—an almost religious devotion to the poem as a transformative art.


It’s difficult to limit the ways Lisa’s work influences me. Most importantly she’s taught me how being a serious reader—a close reader, a student of history, a researcher, a questioner—must underpin writing. The book can be an inquiry, a way to critically open an investigation and deliberately allow it to remain open. Also, she erodes the boundaries of the poem, book and genre itself. Her books are forms for hard thinking. I want to be this rigorous as a writer.


From Scalapino, I considered a mode in which to perceive phenomena in order to write into the present—not to assume I can know it but to inquire of it.

I’ve gained from Brandon the sense that you must work hard and mine deeper for the really good language and associations. His poems confuse the difference between the dream and life purposely, and as such, his poems are among the most visually, spiritually and lyrically rich contemporary poems. Brandon maintains an almost Romantic earnestness in his subjectivity, and so beauty pervades their every move, even while pursuing death’s inscription in life.


The phenomenological as a way of conceiving the world/word makes reading this book a practice in seeing, which is to say, making. Working to understand Stein feels almost identical to making a poem myself. I achieve something; I arrive at a new sight both in language and in the object world. This activity has actually cultivated my writing muscles, I think.


Like any Stevens reader, his poems teach me about pressing my imagination—reaching or digging for stranger or more expansive thinking, then learning to treasure that strangeness. Also, his sense of rhythm within the line is a standard bearer for me.


I could list many ways in which Mathias's poems have taught me something, but most importantly, but this manuscript in particular reminds me that profound thinking and feeling can find simple, stunning expression in the poem if you have a finger on the pulse of human feeling.


Like Anne Carson and Lisa Robertson, Cole Swensen uses the historical as a way to understand fundamental developments that brought us to the postmodern modes of seeing and writing. In this case, I learned about mining my own visual memory for examples of specific emotional questions.


This book spoke to how daily, mundane, even privileged living are burdened by an essentially postmodern solitude. On the level of architecture, Stonecipher taught me something about how logical arrangements and collage can reveal complex emotional valences as they accumulate.

These are easily the most formative books I’ve read in the last three years. Waldrop continues to instruct me about the extended sentence as a vehicle for controlling the speed and exposition of dynamic, complicated logic. Also, the spare lyric series entitled “Song” informed my aims for both strangeness and concision in a short line.


In his insistence on hybridity, I think immediately of Williams when I practice formal experimentation. He travels fearlessly between tones and forms, while always allowing room for oddity and feverishness.


I continue to learn from Josh’s odd, complex prepositional arrangements and inventive sense of narrative.


I return to Willis more than almost any other poet. I’ve learned about the incorporation of sarcasm, irony and wit, but also how to sustain an electric vocabulary from her. Further, Willis, like me, is interested in how Romanticism bears on the Postmodern, especially how the painterly instinct relates to the composition of a poem.
APPENDIX

The poems “Mountains and Sea,” “The Bay,” “Causeway,” and “Lush Spring” are titled after paintings by the late Helen Frankenthaler. “The landscapes were in my arms” is how Frankenthaler famously described the experience of painting “Mountains and Sea,” her most famous work, from memories of Cape Breton.

The poem “What Red Suggests” refers to Cy Twombly’s series “Peonias,” “Bacchus,” and “Lepanto” The italicized last line comes from Rainier Maria Rilke as represented in one of Twombly’s “Peonias.”

“Sleep is a stranger’s glove” is a line from “Song” in Rosmarie Waldrop’s Reluctant Gravities.

The italicized phrases “inside the between that is turning,” “A letter which can wither, a learning which can suffer and an outrage,” and “it is a spectacle it is a binding accident” are borrowed from Gertrude Stein’s Tender Buttons.

“I want you to write the tulip trees until they become real” was a request made by Brandon Shimoda in a letter.