

Predicate

(dialogues with Pablo D'Stair)

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for my father,
Jose Gonzalez-Fernandez

(in this edition)

Victoria Brockmeier's first book of poems, *my maiden cowboy names*, won the 2008 T. S. Eliot Prize and was published by Truman State University Press. She is finishing her dissertation, *Apostate, Sing This World Forth: Avant-Mythopoetic Encounters With Doubt, Chaos, and Community*, at the University at Buffalo.

*Now don't try to figure out
Where I come from
I could be the smart guy from Wall Street
I could be the Purple People Eater's son*

-The 5 Royales

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Introductory material

Included here are the full texts of the four poems discussed throughout this dialogue. The poems 'vespers, flown' and 'house that burned itself down' originally appeared in Victoria Brockmeier's 2008 T.S. Eliot Award winning collection *my maiden cowboy names* (Truman State University Press); the poem 'occasional for hollow bones' originally appeared in *The Boston Review*; the poem 'work of laura' is previously unpublished.

house that burned itself down

it dreams in heat. it dreams in orange flame.
quarried; bared. limestone mines gnaw out
the ground on three sides: behind, a cemetery thrusts

into the air. a century stirs in the ground, more, bones
shifting from their bodies' original lay, webbed moulder
breathing itself down, & smaller. for an instant the house

looks whole, square, lit from within
as if by electric light. but its paint has shredded
from wood aged gray; its roof
sags, broken to muleback by fire then weather.

how much longer can it stand, deedless. how many
long droughts, how much ice splitting its joins. tornados

twisting by a mile off, or less. shreds of weak light
knocking around inside, shaking at its beams & bursting
rotted floorboards from below. the highway growling
into its cellar, the cellar wrestling that growl

around & back. when there's rain
it blackens the boards all over again, raises slime
& fattens splinters. holes for windows

gape, blank as if shutting out winter; snatches
of sky, headlights shoot back dully
from what chinked glass remains.
they want something more to cut into pieces.

work of laura

i am eating only the slenderest flowers:
sympathetic magic. nasturtiums are the hottest, & soon
i will burn my way out. will be blue & black
& white only, angles inked on a page. the high hollow

between my breasts where my ribs divide away, spartan line
of shoulder to wrist studded midway by elbow, point
of hip, shadowed temple: my devotions, this is clarity,

a climb. last week i hit 100 but am back down. my bones
are of iron, oiled gray, weighting me to this crust, turf
where cattle shuffle their muddy hocks. it would help

if i were finely drawn, like shadbush twigs, like wire,
drawn as to the high & sharp, as a carriage,

as the curtains between the planked seat
inside & god's murmuring body. i don't want
to write about blood but it is thick
& inevitable. began today to wean my veins
to light & breath. i'll be beautiful

when i am gone. i'll exhale light
like the moon breathing out her reflection, blow
this corpse free of the filament beneath,
ash, shrapnel, granulate, ad astra. when i am thin

as silk i will float & ripple, you'll see –
stars peeping through my skin, stretched & scraped
to vellum. i'll fold myself to wallet-size
& slip between your pages.

occasional for hollow bones

tonight's reader once advised me to be a group of brown birds settling in a tree,
& then to fly away; she could not have been more right. her work has appeared
from the sides of chalk cliffs after heavy rains,
& behind drivers' reflections in car windshields.

her lines offer a grammar of prodigy:
the dwarfed, the caveblind, those with skins oxidized
to a state between iridescence & black powder, & out of this

she has made herself as much as a migration, twice
annually. please join me in welcoming her

to divide herself in two, a magician
& her own assistant mantled in light
like sequins'. this poet feels wishing

as a compulsion; to ease the sense of stocks
always clocking shut around her ankles & wrists, she's made a study
of hay carts, two-headed snakes, the physics
of spitting into one's palm, double articulations
among the joints in ladybirds' feet, cardinal & ordinal ballistics,

rope-skipping & methods for opening fortune cookies
one-handed. so in her work we are offered

as in sacrifice, as grass from the sea, braided & vulnerable
to ash, a mummers' dance lacking allegiance to the history

which speaks through its wending, its fives. blind us
herself to herself, & she does; she conducts an avid labor of salvage

over stones that have balanced on each other for eons. but too she quills us,
she curves through space algebraically; she spits out stars
like bright seeds we can't bear to take in; for years she has suffered
phantom twin syndrome. a thunderstorm

pressed to the ground, asking our reader to behave like a human being
would only be cruel. please join me. where she garlands herself
with hibiscus petals, creased into blue veins,

where she comes sheer. where she cuts into space. please
welcome her flight. typed at the end of a page, her initials
resemble a butterfly and if you're so lucky
as to receive them in letterpress the urge to caress

their lustrous imprint, ink sticky in the serifs' sharp hollows,
is irresistible. take scarlet the canon
for her acrobatics. it is impossible to praise her too highly.

vespers, flown

"What Thou dost - is Delight" – Dickinson

if he bear it in his arms, be it my body.
if he lay it down, be it tucked into the quiet.
let trill ease to murmur. be me flushed,
tinted beneath the skin, jeweled, smudged,

& if i hold his hands let me kiss them,
let me quake with devotions. if i breathe
be it slow, fortunate. be that i shine

despite whole lives of me spent, brought to beg
& not given; given to beg as though to an embrace.
bound, given haven, straining
& satisfied. if it rise in me like birds

that whirl into lace, the herringbone,
then chessboards, bright webs, craze
of lightning to ground; if it is made of light
& the absence of light, as over sky; if it settle airily:

be it the picture of kneeling, press
of palm to cheek, taste of myself citric & fresh
on his cock, licked from his face. the lips
anywhere, back of my head, top of my wrist,

how anywhere they pin, raze,
how i am bared to bliss. the low
voice, its knowing how the motes of me
knurl together; leather that sings. if these sigh out
let them return. a crash of wings.

if skin, be it given. be it claimed & clean
& written on. be it red running
on pale the color of beach. if he split
it open, be the augury hale, be it witting –

if dark, light candles & let the sky turn. let wax
strike kisses to skin. if i pray,
let the cry plait his pulse to mine.

...if the horse
in his pride were to say
'I am handsome'...

Pablo D'Stair: Sometimes, almost aggressively, in reading your work I felt that I was being put out of perspective, in as many ways as I can hope to make that statement make sense. The gnawing most present throughout these poems is of a world that expresses itself so violently in only extremes of either beseeching or surrendering, but seems elementally to want neither—to want, as far as it is possible, nothing. More pointedly, the verse is an expression wanting nothing but itself—the voice wants to remove any referent, yet remain intact, retain an identify, and moreover an expressible one.

Victoria Brockmeier: I said once, in public, even, that I think my most profound wish is to exist without being under the gaze of the Other. The problem, of course, is that for any theory that bothers to capitalize Otherness, that would mean not existing at all.

PD: Sure. But by this, out of curiosity, do you posit Theory of any type as a given good, or moreso as a necessity? That is, is this view of existence to theory

something that would, for you, need a kind of voluntary participation from the get—jump into the stream that is already there—or something that part of you—perhaps just as much as the part that wishes to exist outside of the gaze of Other—kindles a desire for, that you could exist for a time alone but eventually be found out, be viewed from afar and then closer closer closer?

VB: If I'm understanding you correctly, and jump in if I'm not, then, no, it's a wish for absolute privacy, not even an impenetrable defense against being seen, but a wish to be without having to be visible at all. The impossibility of being found out. Of course there's more to me in total than that, but there's a definite facet of me, and it's the facet that writes, that wants to be unknowable, secret without even having to be hidden. I probably overstated the case when I said that any theory of alterity suggests that not being visible to the Other means not existing, but the notion is in that general territory. If you could get away from the horror of it, the absence of even the responsibility to appear seems kind of fabulous. To me. Of course, I'm a poet and perhaps inadequately concerned with pragmatism.

PD: Likewise jump in if I'm not picking up on something—you seem to have got where I was coming from just fine—you mean that the having the work regarded by a reader, by audience, is something you find necessary and desirous, but feel that, due to some aspect of what poetry is to you, that though your work is technically being looked at—and by your own

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request, so to speak—you yourself are not knowable through it? You would not, perhaps more simply, produce without it in mind that it be read, just don't want what is read to be personally revelatory—you want it to be revelatory of the poetic mechanisms and the apparent aesthetic aspects, but not of the artist?

VB: Where in there did I say that being read is 'necessary and desirous,' that I make any request to be read? Rhetorical question; I didn't. 'To be without having to be visible at all. The impossibility of being found out. . . secret without even having to be hidden' means what it says. This is beneath the issue of being known personally in one's work – it's ontological, not epistemological.

PD: In literature—and certainly in poetry the finest refinement of this is witnessed—there always exists this trouble between wanting to be able to claim one has illuminated something (however much a crumb, and however personal) has gotten something across with some amount of precision while at the same time demanding a recognition for the ability to obfuscate, to take so thin a slice of something, so fine a stab at it that there should be no question of what is being considered, yet when the wound caused by the incision is examined, nothing actually measureable or nameable is there to be regarded: A wound that isn't anything.

VB: I'll take issue with your reference to obfuscation as a thing poetry does or tries to do, or a

thing that is literature's concern. Obfuscation is for married people who're cheating and the accounting departments of corporate behemoths who are. . . cheating. Poetry around the beginning of the twentieth century gets weird, not because people were trying to hide what they were saying but because the resources of the language weren't adequate to the world we were making. It's still mimesis, just using alternative mimetic strategies. The latter part of the Early Modern period saw the same thing, and part of why Eliot got so taken with the Metaphysicals was that their poetry testifies to epistemological crises that mirror our own, Copernicus and Galileo and Bacon having put things into a spin for them as Darwin and Marx and Freud did for us. Donne develops the conceit into this extraordinary display of virtuosity, both poetically and intellectually, that has yet to be matched by anyone, and Herbert – Eliot does him the favor of deciding he was a major poet, but I'll go ahead and say, George Herbert invented verse in English. Hundreds of forms, rhyme and meter, developed out of close approach to his material in every case, and only in a couple cases does he repeat a structure from one poem to another. That's free verse, most of three centuries before the Modernists got there. He was doing concrete poems and breaking the pentameter into shards before Jamestown had even worked out much of an understanding with the natives in what wasn't even Virginia yet. It's not that we want to obfuscate; I think most serious poets have always been teachers, in the sense that we bend our tools entirely toward clarity, and we want people to come along for the ride there, not that we want to mystify them at all. The issue,

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rather, is that what we're grappling with is itself inescapably mysterious. Poetry has before itself the impossible goal of making language do what it can't, or at least can't yet; if what you're doing isn't mysterious, I would harbor a suspicion that it isn't poetry in the first place.

PD: I don't know about poetry getting weird or anything along those lines, I've never been of that mind. There's something about a given time or place finding artistic equilibrium, describing itself in terms of itself that are fundamentally understood by individuals of the time that is, in my way of looking at things, intrinsic, just what naturally occurs. Other than to say that some poetic form or what have you, if put next to poetry from prior eras, would seem different and so 'weird' I don't think poetry every really changes in such terms, anyone who finds modern verse weird, you know they'd find any older verse even weirder.

VB: I could wish. But, nah – as much as my students struggle with Shakespeare, they *really* struggle with Cummings, and he's not even that hard. I actually made the mistake this spring of speaking before thinking when a student asked to talk about a Cummings poem before the others we had for that day because she thought it was the hardest to get. I rattled off something about how, oh, wow, he's often not even taught because people think of him as kind of juvenile and too easy. Oops. But the student wasn't lazy and had had things to say about more regular/established types of poetry, and a little

ellipticism, some minor wrenching-around of the habits of meaning, and she was stymied. I have a very fond dream of getting to teach later and much stranger poetry, but I have yet to figure out how that will even work.

PD: Is cummings a man? Good Christ, that changes everything for me.

VB: e.e. is Edward Estlin. Sorry to unsettle you there.

PD: While I get myself together from that shock, let me ask what is it you teach when you teach a poet or a type of poetry? You teach your interpretation of it? You point out X or Y or Zs interpretation of it? I'm from the uneducated slant on such matters—often I think of this as a sad thing—but to boil it down—and I apologize if my ignorance on the matter comes off as flip—when you say something along the lines of 'This is what cummings is doing here' are you relating something you heard from somewhere else, passing it along, serving as a filter of other 'incorrect' things that have been said/taught, or are you taking a role of origination in what is being said/taught? Is it more of an investigative thing or more a referential relating thing?

VB: Depends a bit on the poem; there's usually some basic historical and biographical background I want to bring out, and there's generally some formal or technical feature I want to draw students' attention to; the latter is an exercise in interpretation, because I'll be,

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e.g., talking about how the stanza structure and rhyme scheme in Swinburne's 'Garden of Proserpine' makes each stanza into a model of the relationship between life and the underworld, and the returning rhyme at the end suggests that death is present in us even while we're up here doing things. Sometimes I'll mention someone else's readings if I think they're useful, and if I'm using someone else's that I agree with I try to remember to give credit. I haven't made lesson plans for years; I know my material well enough that we basically just talk – I ask questions to try to spur some analysis, we puzzle through them, etc. On a good day a student will ask something I've not previously thought about and I have to work it out on my feet, or discussion just goes there, not out of a pointed question, just following our collective nose. I'm pretty committed to handing off authority to students, and poetry offers a lot of opportunities for that because I can demonstrate that I know quite a bit about this stuff, and still run into things I have to stop and figure out, which puts them in the position of figuring it out with me, offering suggestions of their own. Reasons to get out of bed in the morning.

PD: As to obfuscation, this is something beyond conscious consideration, not the same as an active deception—though it can, of course, also be consciously manipulated. Any artistic form has no choice but to reveal itself as obfuscation, a disguise that doesn't disguise but reveals, as Chesterton might have it. This is from a tilt on poetry and literature on my part, in general, that doesn't seek to draw the

reader/audience into it, but to, through virtue of being literary expression, turn them into themselves with some kind of outside reference point, introspection through a filter. The unconscious cannot but be obscured through the filter of the conscious, the ratio of the one to the other just wouldn't allow for it. Which may or may not be just repeating you, of course.

VB: That notion of a disguise that reveals, that's one of my favorite tricks art plays. I have half an idea to write about performativity in confessional poetry along those lines, maybe as a piece of scholarly book #2, a couple years down the road. I unstintingly love the situation of artifice and revelation passing back and forth into one another.

PD: Sure, I'm with you, that is where it's at. The shift between artifice and revelation is, to my way of thinking, a central aspect of cognitive thought, of discourse both concrete and rhetorical, art having no choice but to incorporate it—it is one of the most valuable and fascinating things to make artifact of. I admit I'm sometimes troubled when the idea comes across that it is something isolated to art, like it is a clever observation that exists only as alluring abstract, but I am just as of the mind that very little exists solely in art and whatever does has little to no value.

VB: At the same time, getting something across isn't necessarily the goal, either, or not necessarily my goal. It might just be because I had a weird track through the peer/workshop experience; at my MFA, no one knew what to do with me, and I'd get responses

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to my poems, no exaggeration, of, 'I didn't know what this word meant,' and at Buffalo, no one also knows what to do with me because I have sentences that more or less hang together and posited speakers with more or less perceptible identities. I think it predates those experiences, though, and I've only started to articulate it more recently. Whatever the case, I have a very hard time wanting to write for people – poetry. When I'm on something scholarly, audience is in my mind as much as I try to get it to be in my comp students' minds, but in poetry, I think what I'm trying to do is more about letting the words do things than about conveying anything. This is my take on what it means to take the poem as an object a la Objectivist ideas, and I'm not at all sure the Objectivists would have much to do with me on this account. Inspired by actual events poetics, one might say. You're not trying to say something; it's not that you don't, but that that's not the goal. You're trying to make a thing unto itself.

PD: All of this, I admit, is outside of my little lay realm, I've never known what to do with peers or workshops or 'audience concrete', to make a sloppy phrase. Audience is always abstraction to me, nothing to do with literary creation, though I see from your notion of artist as teacher that audience would have to be integral.

VB: Just to clarify, although I talk about poets wanting one thing or another, that's really a slippage. My interest is in what poems do, and what they can do,

way before writers – so it's poems as teachers, to sharpen the point.

PD: Noted. I'm personally mistrustful of anything written with the idea that anybody reading it would have concrete purpose in doing so, some idea in them predating the read-experience of what may or may not be contained in it. It's simplistic, I know, but to me audience is a nonentity to creation—or is the acknowledgement that all audience and all reaction at all time exists or might as well exist, so therefore is moot to literature itself—the ache of artistic creation is the wrenching in one between unconscious expression—which I would posit as natural, or at least primary (99 percent of someone, I like to say) and the germ of consciousness that seeks to at once define-through-unconscious and to override it, define it while using it for definition. This seems a bit in line with what you're saying, so maybe Objectivists wouldn't dig me either, for what that amounts to. If I ever get one on the phone, I'll ask them.

VB: At this point, you'll have better luck with an Ouija board. Let me know if you hear anything back – I have some things I'd like to ask them, myself.

PD: To save time, just tell me the thing you'd like to ask them the most, right now, and that'll improve our chances.

VB: Ask 'What's up with the italics in *80 Flowers?*' I have to ask, though, if you consider audience a nonentity in the creative moment, and you

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aren't writing in a way that makes the work itself an entity with whom you're engaged there, who are you writing for? What are you writing for – in the sense of regarding what thing, and also in the sense of why bother?

PD: I think the notion of writing, the act of writing, predates the notion of writing for some purpose and—sorry for the clumsy attempt at phrase turning—it still predates it, now. I like making shit up and expressively investigating unconscious through the filter of conscious. As to the lark of readership and all, putting books together, I'm a hobbyist. I dig learning what others have to say about my own work in whatever limited way such knowledge becomes available, but this is really just a personal affinity, a mild curiosity.

VB: This is also bringing to mind something that's been coming up in my thoughts lately, that where other forms of writing have to write for people who exist, one of the things that makes poetry poetry is that it gets to posit its own ideal reader – a person with, say, all the knowledge, the perceptivity, the patience (and time), the readerly agility it could possibly want. Generosity, even; I think poetry's ideal reader is very generous. This is not to write without regard to an audience at all, not to treat them as moot, but to pay little heed to actual readers and instead write toward the possibilities of poetry as such. So its pedagogical tenor is decidedly not populist, not speaking to the people, but offering us a site of productive challenge.

PD: Ideal reader is a curious way of putting things to me, something I don't quite know how to articulate my thoughts on. It does bring me to one of my irritating inquiries though, a kind of side point to what I feel we're both talking about here. If you, personally, were to come across a poem—we'll use the one included here—not by an established or known poet, by an absolute cipher to you—nothing written about them, no way to identify them, only the verse itself, no other context—how to do you approach it, what do you do with it? I mean this in the sense of 'walk me through what happens in Victoria' in response to a piece of poetry, full stop, but feel free to come at the inquiry however you like. The poem will use is the following, generously offered for use by anonymous:

so don't we touch like slept on
pillowcases and aren't we lost
like long spent coins, so
we don't sleep or talk of
sleeping or count the fingers of
the hands we're on
or ask about the water we'll
use to cool our necks to wet
our faces warm our hands
or ask about the last of the borrowed
dresses the borrowed socks the
forlorn forced forward
caresses
we're just as soft as dust that's
settled long, colours the cupboard's knobs
the window's latches
we're just as soft as cautious
remarks
the damp dish towels and tin

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clock faces
so don't we touch like eaten
bread and aren't we lost
like rains to wrinkling sea waters
slate of pavement to the wrinkling
trends of an evening's passage
aren't we tongues that lap until
they pant

VB: So I'm being tested here. There's no title, but that could be an artifact of you pasting it in here, so I'll leave that as an unaddressable issue because the text's provenance is uncertain. The first thing I notice is a kind of loose litany structuring it. Repetition in 'so don't we touch' and a list phenomenon going on with 'we don't sleep or' do this other thing or this other thing or this other thing. Suggests rumination. Loosely iambic throughout, or at least tending toward an alternating stress rhythm that gives the poem a measured, persistent forward motion ('so *don't* we *touch* like *slept* on/ *pillowcases* and *aren't* we *lost*/ like *long* spent *coins*, so/ we *don't* *sleep* – major substitution there, the interrupted rhythm in line with the interrupted nights & disturbance in the relationship – or *talk* of/ *sleeping* or *count* the *fingers* of/ the *hands* we're *on*, etc.). You could quibble that *spent* gets a stress, and the poem falls away from the alternation more in about the third quarter or so, but overall, that seems like a pattern; the slight insistence that gives the piece, coupled with the litany method, produces emotional tension. Resistance and/or an attempt to persuade the other half of the 'we' of something, presumably that the relationship has

problems, that the other person should be paying attention to them, etc.

At the image level, 'we touch like slept on/ pillowcases' and 'we touch like eaten bread' – probably my favorite first-read images, because they're both kind of numinous and they don't hang together in an obvious sense; slept-on pillowcases would touch because the sleepers' heads had shifted them together, which is incredibly passive, and eaten bread would either not touch (I assume other eaten bread) at all – because it's gone – or would touch by being in someone's stomach, again extremely passively, plus it's in the process of disappearing. These people touch because circumstances put them together, and especially toward the end of the poem, they're vanishing, also because of circumstances outside their agency. Another beginning-to-end pairing, we're 'lost/ like long spent coins' and 'lost/ like rains to wrinkling sea waters' – more interesting echoes & differences. Coins get lost in among other coins and can't be traced but retain their discrete existence; drops of rain actually cease to be drops at all, so again we have a more radical disappearance toward the end of the poem. Toward the beginning, the speaker is regretful and toward the end, more intensely bothered by the state of things. The images generally are very domestic – pillowcases, cupboards, dish towels – with another strain running through the piece of somatic material, fingers, cool water on necks, forced caresses, the tongue at the end, & together, those two tropes show this as a romantic & domestic partnership.

Line breaks mostly tend to interrupt thoughts rather than to package them seamlessly, which is a

thing I do very often – especially the line break after a verb ('to wet' – what? and the next line answers, 'our necks'). That draws the poem forward in a way that counterpoints its rhythm & raise the level of tension another notch; the marching iambs put the voice in a position of mastery, and the jarring line breaks recurrently deny the reader's wish to know what's going on. The poem insists on its authority in a number of ways. I wonder pretty hard at the multiple line breaks after 'of's – you have to have a pretty good reason to break after a preposition & I'm not seeing a reason to do that inherent in the lines. The hesitations/withdrawings are stronger where the line ends on a word that's interesting in itself as well as making us get to the next line to figure out what's being said. I'm almost never a fan of single-word lines; the last word in a line gets extra weight, and the first word does as well, so a single-word line gets just incredible punch, and 'forced/ caresses' then going on to the next unit of thought is over the top. 'cautious/ remarks,' exact same structure, I have the same reaction. The people's excruciating caution is already evident in the poem, and emphasizing 'remarks' that way isn't necessary; undercuts the voice, makes it seem showy, bludgeons the reader with its point.

Consonance on 'forlorn forced forward/ caresses' also seems unnecessary, & even the ideas themselves do – the people are already forlorn and already forced; they touch the way pilowcases that have been slept on touch. The subtler 's-t' pattern in 'soft as dust that's/ settled' broken by the then very elongated 'long' does accomplish something, gives quick sibilant little 's-t'

echoes while we're talking about dust and then the phonemically contrasting 'long' really feels like an unimaginably long time – so this is a poem that can work with sound, but sometimes hits too hard.

The ending leaves me nonplussed. I don't see these people panting at all – they're so passive, so caught up in very everyday things; their whole world is long-settled dust and tin clock faces and dish towels and things they don't talk about, as the poem gives it to us. I can barely see them lapping, and setting out that 'they pant' by itself, a short line that seems to want to sum up the poem, or possibly to respond to it – I just don't believe it, after what the poem establishes in its first twenty-six lines. Maybe it's supposed to be a dull, automated sexuality, panting that goes along with the 'forlorn forced forward/ caresses,' but the line structure suggests intensity. On a first read, the intention there is obscure to me.

PB: No. No test, all as advertised, just a satisfaction of a curiosity.

VB: This is where I go with the idea of being out from under the Other's gaze: the relationship isn't between writer and audience, past or present or future or purely hypothetical, but between writer and language itself. Language itself does not care very much for us, as you may have noticed if you've ever asked it to dinner and drinks. I think (and I'm lifting this from Blanchot and Adorno and several other people; don't think I have all these grand ideas on my own) this is one way of expressing writers' sense of isolation: it's not just that we're such rarefied persons or such

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poorly-socialized ones, but that what we do that makes us writers, the knot at the core of our identities, is in relating to a thing that fundamentally cannot be related to, that will not hail us back when we hail it, that is not a person and therefore cannot bestow the status of personhood on us. We experience the isolation of radical disappearance, not from human community, but as human beings.

PD: After all of my high talk about abstraction, this is outside of my scope. I've never thought in terms of language as separate persona and in reflection see it as something of a neat game.

VB: You are missing out. I totally hang out with language more than I hang out with people – pretty much a requirement to do a dissertation. We are buds.

PD: Yeah, it sounds wild. When I took some acid and tried to read Edgar Poe the words kept sliding off the page, skidding all over the floor, it was a drag to get them back on, smooth them to place, that's the closest I can come to it.

VB: Where I've never smoked pot. True story. I'm built poorly for socializing but well for giving my Friday nights to work.

PD: You mentioned before using language to express something it cannot yet, which maybe I'm wrongly confusing myself with here, but positing

language as literally a separate entity makes that tough, yeah?

VB: Why? If I treat language as having something like autonomy, something like independence, will, then that gives it a capacity to surpass me and my pitiable little skills. It can go beyond what the writer wants; it has its own, as-yet-unactualized – images, metaphors, correspondences, ideas; syntactical, or for that matter, asyntactical structures; it gets the power to do things I can't even name yet. It ceases to be a scene where I use language at all, but one where I follow it into the creation of, hopefully, good poems.

PD: I just want to know for clarification—not to get hung up on exact wording, that's not my scene—when you say you treat it as having autonomy, is this to say that you really know it doesn't, you really are putting together a, for lack of a better word, game for yourself, using terms-of-art, or do you actually, in the most literal sense, think of language as an independent entity, as something that has, as you suggest, will and wants and abilities it's own? There's something you say that reminds me of a darling line by David Mamet where one fellow asks another how he comes up with his ideas and the reply is 'I try to imagine a fella cleverer than myself and then I ask myself 'Now what would he do?' or something to that general effect.

VB: The first answer is that this is one of many things I don't worry about. I treat language as having

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autonomy because doing so produces good poems, not because I believe in it or don't in a particular sense. The second answer is that I suppose if I step back, I do regard it as having independent existence and even autonomy in pretty literal ways. As much as we do, anyway (which intentionally turns the question back on itself).

PD: As far as artists being at all isolated, or isolated more than non-artist individuals, I've often puzzled over that and of late find myself more thinking it not so true. It's like the line in that song I can't think of the name of 'Everybody hates a tourist, especially one who thinks it's all such a laugh'—the honest, crushing isolation of those without literature, 'isolation utter', I might call it, I find more profound than the angsty rhetorical isolation I feel as an artist. The moments I've felt most alone have had nothing to do with literary creation, with attempt, with art. I wonder how radical the disappearance you speak of is—not that I claim to understand it, as I've said—and how much it is a cobbled isolation, even a chosen isolation—that tourist thing.

VB: I'm cynically sure that people who go without literature are as a rule quite secure in their place in the world. Much more so than serious readers are. As far as the disappearance of the writer before the work being a choice, no. The idea is that one cannot be an autonomous subject and also write – that writing means abdicating your being as a person to

make way for the work. Under this model, if you're you, you're not writing.

PD: Indeed, do you think so? Out of earnest curiosity, why is that? Is it something in interface with literature that leads one to less connection or security? And from that—however you answer—do you see a surety in ones place in the world as something, to chose a term here, negative? I think about it and can see how interface with literature would lead one to less surety—a confusion even between literary construction and reality, nothing secure can be built upon the thing that literary creation is—but in the end find this lack of surety sadly baseless, almost a mistake. What is one to take from literature—specifically from language as a separate entity—that is of value? It's like studying insects, isn't it? Much can be learned, but you don't want to get lost in it, confuse termites for next door neighbors or roommates.

VB: Not talking about being confused between literature and reality, no. One would not end up being unable to tell the difference between termites and neighbors – but taken in a different sense, that's where literature does put us. I'm not going to go to a termite colony and ask if I can borrow its hedge shears, but I would want for literature to make us think twice about assumptions that neighbors are more important than termites. It throws hierarchies into question; it throws authority into question. The mere fact that a book can somehow be in charge of me for a while, can affect my emotions and senses and creep into my thoughts when I'm not even reading it, does some of that work,

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whatever that book's content might be. It destabilizes the category of the human, categories of power, assumptions about how we should talk about things, and those broader actions can affect how we think about neighbors and termites. Humans and animals, humans and the natural world, straight people and queers, superpowers and developing nations, law and deviance, on and on. With those stakes, I absolutely do want us to get lost in it and thereby lose our grip on our concepts about the world around us.

Personally, I find that very freeing—words will never care that I'm inadequate to every task; they never have even the possibility of caring. Other people are a source of much greater agitation because even if they think I'm great and even if I believe them, they always present the possibility of dissatisfaction, too, and some days, that feels like a lot more to worry about than it's worth.

PD: Certainly, of course, as you suggest here the notion of creating outside of any gaze, away from any other, is simplicity itself, has simply to do with creating. The infusion of the other, the observer, seems always a choice, and a conscious one, on the part of the artist. I'm very much of the mind that unobserved, unread, unconsidered literature—other than perhaps by the artist, and even then only perhaps—is of no less 'value' than anything else. The old 'If someone wrote King Lear but no one ever read it, would it have the same merits to it?' kind of rhetoric. It's charming, though, this idea of almost imaginary-friend-making language and words themselves—I'm at

base skeptical, simply because I don't think individuals have the capacity to truly do such a thing, to truly express without concern for outwardly identifying, even the act of letting words do what they do, no preconceived conscious idea or agenda does nothing to alter the fundamental unconscious dominance of literary expression. There's a bashfulness, but marked with, from some other things you've expressed, antagonism—self antagonism or outward antagonism—in what you say here.

VB: A lot of writers I admire seem to have a decisively violent, yes, antagonistic relationship to writing; a good number of others seem to have as intensely cozy a way of coming to it (Cixous would lead that pack – if I could feel as intimately at home as she does with it, I think I'd fairly well float off the ground from bliss). I'm somewhere between those two ends of the spectrum; writing and I get along fine, I like it, I accept the prickliness and distractedness it brings out in me as very acceptable prices to pay, and, beyond anything I could explain logically, I just believe in poetry, somehow. Antagonism manifests for me in deep regret. Myung Mi Kim told me once that the poems you're working on are more alive than the ones you've finished, and that rang very true for me, because being a poet – in the act that makes me a poet – is like working and working and working to heal some bloody little abortion of text into a living creature, and finishing it actually means failing, means I've hit a point where there's nothing more to be done for the poor thing, and in declaring it done, all I say is, intending the funerary euphemisms, that it's in a better place now

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where no one will bother it ever again. Having my book out set off a protectiveness in me that I didn't at all expect, but which was very intense. I'm still, honestly, a little angry that anyone can just go out there and handle my poor poems that will never be all they could because they are, after all, just poems, not the wild potential in language that can be sensed but never captured.

PD: What prompted your decision to publish? Was the anger a surprise, or something you realized beforehand would be there, accepted, don't really have a problem with? I've really never understood publishing as anything but an absolute lark—in my mellowest moments I call it 'an art form in itself', but in my more honest moments I think that's just something sweet I say that doesn't mean shit. Was there something you wanted for your work, itself, out of it being in a published volume versus not?

VB: The freaked-out-ness – anger and I'll come right out and say it, a mournful discomfort – surprised me entirely. I thought getting a book out would be fun, and much more importantly, necessary careerwise. You can't get a decent job with an MFA; people are hard-pressed to get one with an MFA and a book on a fairly well-respected press. I like the 'whee' little sense of accolade that comes from getting a poem picked up by a journal, and I've always had vague notions that someone might read something of mine and look me up and we'd become poetry pals, but that's not yet happened and I doubt it will. If it weren't for the

necessity of academic career, I doubt I'd ever send anything to national journals anymore or try to get another book out on a major press, honestly.

PD: Stepping away from that, a moment, to something we were discussing earlier, I'll just say bluntly that I'm not the sort to turn to reference materials to understand words I don't know, people I've never heard of, subtleties of meaning—in short, I don't participate in precision while knowing that for there to be such a thing participation is necessary. In this, though, there is another illustration of the clattering that goes on in poetic expression—the artist may labour to choose words so meaningful, calibrated to an exactness that would perhaps bowl a reader over, if only the reader had an active understanding of the words, this choosing having the result of cleaving off vast swaths of potential 'understanders' from the initial pen stroke, shortening the hope of connection while intensifying the need for passionate, intimate, perfectly individual expression. All of this has been said before, of course, and more elegantly than that.

VB: Honestly – I think those people should look things up. They should ideally have the enjoyment of their own curiosity driving them, anyone reading poetry in the first place should have that, and if not that, at least a sense of pride, and if not *that*, then boredom and the internet should give them the excuse. God gave us dictionary.com and Google for the specific purpose of looking up things we don't immediately recognize in poems. If I wanted to connect with people who can't be bothered to do a

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web search to give themselves a neat little scrap of knowledge they didn't have before, I could go hang out at any bar in the nation. But in life, I don't have much patience with people having that attitude, and writing, I don't even ask the question, because it isn't about making friends. I'm terrible at making friends; if that were what writing were about, I'd be a failure. It's about making poems, for which I have slightly better aptitude.

PD: While I see where you're coming from, surely, I'd have to snuffle a bit at this. The notion that the only source of knowledge is scraps of information, history, trivia—or definitions—from an outside source looked up in a moment of ignorance is curious. The idea that the lack of ready understanding of a word is something to solve, a puzzle, a deficit that needs to be addressed through reference and that the only alternative to this is to be a thoughtless cretin imbibing liquor to no end is garish, you know? There is something very much to be said for not understanding and simply thinking—or indeed in simply thinking without there having to be some outside referent to decipher—not understanding one thing will do nothing to keep me creating another, whether or not understanding could lead to a creation. I've always found a stark artificiality in this notion of the 'intelligent way to read' or indeed to write, to anything that is set, no matter how it's sliced, to elevate one mode of thought or expression above another, the artist self-identifying as superman. 'You didn't bother to look up the thing I wrote that you didn't understand'

and so therefore are a bum, someone not worth my time is flippantly degrading to most modes of literary artistry I can think of. And after all, it's not just references that can be looked up at a go that are the rub—how many goddamned hours have I gone round and round and round with 'In the rooms the women come and go speaking of Michelangelo' and there's not shit on this planet I could look up to help me understand it better. I read it, I didn't understand it and I've sat in bars, at times, talking about just that. If I initially didn't know who Michelangelo was, yeah, I might Google the name, but it would illuminate absolutely nothing, as the line would be the same were it 'speaking of Caravaggio' or 'speaking of the Whisky-a-go-go'.

VB: The Michelangelo line is easy; it's synecdoche for empty conversation at parties. Of the time – today's party small talk is not often about Michelangelo. Looking up Michelangelo won't do much good, there, no, but knowing about the salon scene at the time where 'Prufrock' is set actually will. Unadorned information illuminates bits like that, usefully, and once those factual things are in hand, a poem like that starts to open up in many more directions. There's plenty to be said for thinking into a poem without understanding it – I would say very firmly that the best poems always escape full explication and the full understanding that would underpin that, and that's what makes them inexhaustible, objects unto themselves rather than vehicles for communication – but I'm going to stick to my guns on this one. As I said: poetry gets to posit its

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ideal reader, and the most basic, easiest part of being that ideal reader is crediting the poem with readability. A will to be read, if you'll permit me to subjectify poems so much. The next stage outward from that is being willing to do whatever work the poem asks you to do in order to read it – know about the sumptuary laws in Shakespeare's day, or spend the time with Elizabeth Bishop's quiet, domestic diction to figure out what it accomplishes that other ways of writing don't, or watch for the gaps and dissonances among Lyn Hejinian's sentences as much as you watch for their connections.

PD: Is that what the Michelangelo line is? I've never thought of it in those terms—honestly because I don't know what those terms mean. I got it, now, though, I'm glad it's something like that. But every poem would ask you to do whatever it takes to find it readable, to find some meaning in it, to find merit in it—look hard enough, take it for granted that there is something there and that it's a worthwhile construct and all. But certainly you don't really think that about poetry, yes? Perhaps about vetted, already established verse, but not about all poetry. Or perhaps about the objective, learnable aspects—laws in the time of Shakespeare—but not about the subjective aspects you bring up about Bishop or Hejinian.

VB: I absolutely think that about poetry. If it doesn't work in those registers, I frankly don't think it's much good. You may be writing lines, but you're not writing poetry.

Not sure why you would describe diction/word choice or the logical relations/dissonances among elements as subjective. . . there's some wiggle room, as there is with any interpretive act, of poetry or of law, but those features are entirely intellectually apprehensible. They're not down to taste; I like purple, someone else likes blue, which is how I mean 'subjective.' Like so many other things, you can't go in thinking you're going to master everything this poem means once and for all, but you can definitely come with a basic assumption that it's meaningful, and that its operations can be analyzed and described.

I say frequently that poetry is the only thing there is like being in love, and I usually mean that in terms of writing it, but I suppose I'm tending toward a stance that reading it partakes of that kind of trust and flexibility as well.

PD: Is like being romantically in love with a person, you mean? Again, not to sound obnoxious, I just always wonder when such terms are used—one highly, irrevocably subjective, personal perception used to define what may or may not be another, you know? By way of example, I sort of find a closeness to my feelings for my children, my fascination, my love for them in what and how I write, but before I had children I'd have to say it was more akin to a love I had of my own psychology and bent. Of course one can also non-romantically love another, love a certain headspace or sensation, love a painting or the way a certain room is quiet and these are all wildly different things I could easily see as close to artistic creation and creative interaction with art.

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VB: Not having had children, I don't feel like I can speak to that; to expand on my statement, though, what I mean is love that makes you happy that the other person exists on the earth, love that makes you enjoy doing things for him or her, without thinking about what you get back (or what you don't get back). Generous, happy devotion to someone outside of you. That's writing poetry to me, and working through this, it appears that it's reading poetry, too.

Poetry should be pedagogical, I think; this is one of the nice side effects it can have, anyway. People misread Pound in (actually, without) this light all the time, or project this forward to your own criticism of Eliot. He's not dropping foreign phrases in all the time to be a snob; if you have even a very basic sense of language, what you'd get from having flipped through the dictionary (or now, clicked through it) when you were a kid and looked at a few etymologies, you can puzzle out enough to realize that in almost every case, especially in the Cantos, he gives you a translation right there. He may not signal it as such, but it's there, usually right after the Italian/Greek/etc. The Chinese characters, he gives a key and you can literally plug in the words he gives for their meanings right into the sentences where he uses them. The literature and myth and historical references, too – it's not a poet shutting people out, at all. It's one using things that are precisely germane to what he wants the poetry to do, with the notion that if someone cares about the poem, they'll trace down the material they didn't recognize and end up smarter people with better senses of the

world. If they don't care about the poem, maybe they're lost causes, or maybe I need to write more interesting poems. And I'm not nearly the encyclopedist Pound is; I use the words I do in the same way that I use material from farm auctions or sewing or botany or the way small-town Missourians or New Orleanians speak or the way psychotics speak. It's just stuff that's there, and if the poem needs any of that, from whatever sources, it goes in.

PD: Oh, my criticism of Eliot is perfectly sound and made with the utmost love. It touches on much of what I've been saying. Eliot, the words he wrote—no knowledge of the man or his stances or whatever the fuck—has been a living presence in my mind since fourteen, read, re read, recited, re-recited, fumbled with, thought about, twined around and around and around in me so much to the point I'm inseparable from it. Eliot is not—without even going into statements he makes to such—a 'poet of the people' and his distanced, anthropological observance and alignments of the society around him are not 'everyman' or have any thought to be.

VB: It's a thing in Eliot studies, to talk about Eliot as actually populist, believe it or not. Tons of stuff on Eliot and popular music, Eliot and Westerns, etc.

PD: Eliot studies. Oh what a world.

VB: You really think Eliot's distanced and anthropological? In some of the earlier poems, where

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he's a bit meaner, maybe, but under the mask – that disguise that reveals – of critiquing things, he's cutting himself up, too. There's a great piece by Jewel Spears Brooker that traces him identifying with the mutilated and raped Philomela through *The Waste-Land* that hits that on the head. Probably a couple by her, but at least one really excellent article I've run across. After *Asb-Wednesday*, that all disappears for good too. This is where the Eliot chapter in *Apostate* takes off.

PD: I do think he is distanced and anthropological, yes. This doesn't mean that he doesn't have a self, it just means he's distanced and anthropological—he was likely a dick, too, you know? I've never found his poetry mean, though. Really, I don't think he'd know how to be mean, just vile, just pathetically timid and selfish in cruelty. As to him identifying with this or that figure out of this or that work or history, just because he identifies with it doesn't mean he should, that there is any reason he ought to—people identify with all kinds of things all the time.

VB: Getting away from Eliot for now and returning to what we were discussing, the appearance of mastery is a performance, and that's where I see my work happening with regard to its handling of power, too. If you really buy that knowing a lot of big words and building long, dense sentences with odd images in them means I'm not as fraught with terror and neurosis and inadequacy as anyone else (and some people have indeed taken my work to indicate that), you've missed a

lot. If you think it means *the poems* aren't themselves so fraught, you've missed things I actually care about.

PD: No, I don't mean that. Not about you, or about anyone, probably. As to the poems, I'm at a loss as to, from this exact point, how to turn to a regard of them, themselves, in a way that I think is what you mean by that. And I recognize this, won't attempt it.

Pedagogical, if it means what I think it means, sure, but as I always say "To what end?" Everyone misreads everyone—isn't that the old joke "Misread any good books lately?" It's what's to be expected, being misread, if there is an ounce of reality in a work, because that Eliot or Pound or me or you have this to say about that, written in dialect or foreign tongue, explained or clued outward with context clues is a further form of the conscious obfuscation I mention again and again, but is moreso the conscious aspect of art relating only to itself, making itself the purpose. That poetry can teach—other than trivial new words and tidbits or what not, if one takes the time to look such things up—is all well and good, but it's curious to understand what could be meant by this teaching.

VB: How about to teach that there are rewards to curiosity? That some really valuable things take time and work to understand; that some of them, you never fully understand, and their being beyond you can be a source of delight rather than a reason to put them aside. That the commonly-held modes we have for talking about ourselves, our world, don't sufficiently address the things they're supposed to convey; that those commonly-held modes of discourse might even

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be obstacles to apprehension rather than routes to clarity. I could go on for a long while – but all this depends on one giving over one's attention to the poem, and, necessary to that, enjoying it for its difficulty rather even than doing so in spite of it. That's probably what my ideal reader, at least, begins by doing.

PD: Is this something that poetry teaches or that anything teaches? Or is this something that happens, of its own, poetry or no, teaching or no? There certainly is reward for curiosity and very much in poetry, but equally as very much in everything. So, I don't argue or disagree or anything like that, but rather redirect to a question of your mention of Delight. You posit delight as a worthwhile thing, a reward? Again, I'm not saying I don't, but I myself find it a blah one. I find frustration, cudgeling discomfort, gnashing, fruitless inner or outward investigation at something—artistic or not—far more exhilarating, much more of a reward. Not in a fun little paradox that since I like it, discomfort equals comfort, but just very flatly as I say it.

VB: Your world must be shorter on frustration and discomfort than mine is. I have that in spades, and the last thing I need is for books to give it to me, too.

As for whether poetry teaches anything that everything else doesn't – where does one even begin? The vast majority of Western daily life teaches and rewards obedience, objectifying others, objectifying yourself, gauging the value of one's life in terms of

material security and power over others, etc. to the absurd situation in which we have to live. Poetry is one of very few entities that teaches and rewards the opposite of all these things.

PD: To Be Continued, certainly, To Be Continued.

Your piece *house that burned itself down* can play Rosetta Stone in my thoughts to your verse and the specific voice it creates.

VB: I never thought of it that way at all, but that's the poem I almost always start readings with, just because of its starkness. It's really fun to come up and launch into that without preamble.

PD: Is there—I ask from a vantage point of zero experience but utmost curiosity—a difference in speaking out a poem versus knowing someone is reading it? I've always felt there must be something profoundly shaking in it, in speaking and knowing that the experience of the listener/audience is so far away from the reader/audience. I always wonder what to make of it.

VB: There is, for me, at least, yeah, huge difference. I'm not even sure I can explain the magnitude of it, or all its sources. In writing, I have such an easy relation to the poems; for example, I have some sexy poems. I have some angry ones and some sad ones this applies to as well, but sexy is probably more fun, so we'll stay with that. Writing them, I don't even think of them as sexy at all, it's just, this word,

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this phrase, hm, that line break needs to be elsewhere. Very decent, I swear! Thinking about someone reading one of those squicks me out, though, because people have a tendency to see a poet as a transparent projection of/in her poems, and, yeesh, I do not want strangers thinking about, say, me masturbating without getting to orgasm and then writing poems instead. It didn't happen! It's just the poem! And even if it had happened, since I'm not there in the room with a reader, s/he's freer to have salacious thoughts than if s/he were confronted with me standing there and being, as I am in readings, fairly decent in spite of my sexy poems. Those pieces sometimes make me blush, actually, when I do them before an audience, because I truly forget how sensual they are until I see people's expressions (and imagine their responses, whether their expressions indicate anything or not). But I love doing them. Same with my angry poems and with some of my discursively very fragmented ones – I forget how they appear to people until I cause them to appear before people, but it's generally a positive experience. Very different from considering someone reading them; it's more fun, less intimate. I suppose I'm more in charge of how the poem comes off, and in particular how I come off as related to it but also distinct from it.

PD: Do you very much feel a connection, either direct or as undercurrent, with the exact audience in front of you at a given reading or is the experience more inward—is the audience a unit or is it many individuals, or does it feel one or the other, both at once? And just pester with further elaborative inquiry,

is one audience the same as another, does something alter in you, your reading—what you feel is being expressed and how—based on elements such as size of audience, particular appearance or sense of familiarity or kinship with audience?

VB: I'm chary enough about the notion of expression that I'll back away from that and answer this in terms of what a reading is rather than what might be expressed. Reading in a bar is different from reading in an art gallery, reading in the afternoon is different from reading at night, reading as a guest for someone's class is different from reading for a university's series – and I've done both those last two in the same day a couple times. I've never thought about whether an audience is a unit or many individuals, that I can recall, and trying, I'd say that even varies situation to situation. I'm comfortable in front of people, though, as a rule, in pretty much any situation.

PD: There's immense power—I think maybe even more than in the read version of literature—in spoken literature, often I think it's a shame words don't vanish after they're read. For my part, they kind of do, as I've identified that I don't stop or look up, certainly not during the process. Perhaps I more align myself to a spoken form of things, a thing where there isn't time to slow the pace, manipulate, delve for more before proceeding, everything just goes. I kind of doubt it, though, only because I'm such a Glenn Gould boy. I'm having a crisis, perhaps.

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VB: Maybe predictably, I'm a (rare, I suspect) fan of plain old old-school poetry readings where you get twenty or thirty minutes of a single person's work, specifically because I like to sit down in it and see where that puts me. Of course that's only any good when the poet is also a talented reader who connects with a crowd – but I think that ought to be a standard if you're going to read anyway. We've had a lot of events here in the past few years where simply scads of poets pop up and do one poem, one after another, and those wear me out. The other side of reading for an audience vs. being read, of course, is that if a poem is complex at all, it's going to lose a lot of that potential in a reading, and I miss that, both as a reader and as an auditor – so I like a fairly substantial reading from one person to open onto at least some of that richness. Plus, I think there's more integrity in committing to the exposure of a reasonable chunk of your work, a braver address to community.

PD: That's all interesting. As I say, I've no personal experience with it, but have always had, I suppose I realize in thinking about what you say, a kind of aversion to such things—as attendee or as participant. Like authors putting their pictures on their books or mentioning their hobbies and pets in pointless by-lines. Only more so. It's all harmless, of course, and I'm speaking of formless reactions in my gut, here. It's another of my own tensions—on one hand, it should all be lark, none of it matters in the end but on the other I see things nothing to do with the art in such scenes and so get irritable. But, art doesn't,

I've always said, have to have anything to do with art. In how you say there should be a standard if one is going to read, it just leaves me feeling on guard, wondering what is this standard, what should it be, what could it be, it leaves me uneasy as to extending into—to again borrow from my boy Glenn Gould—the artist as self-positing superman, the tuxedoed fallacy, addressing from a powerbase they are 'entitled to'.

VB: As for standards, I'm saying that if someone's going to get up and claim the attention of a room/auditorium full of people, that person ought to be a good reader. That has to kind of go without saying; you don't want to sit and listen to a shitty band, and I think even less to a shitty reader of poetry.

PD: Back to *house that burned itself down*—here I find the most complete version, the most unselfconscious version of Identity. There is something in it, the idea of identifying with Result, with abandon, with elements passed what would traditionally be included as definition of a thing, that speaks to me of the desire to have what I will call 'utter removal'—to be able to view the result of yourself, but only to better have language, images, circumstances to fill in cracks of what you were before being terminated—there is not some idea to have something laid waste, razed, to have this 'return to ash' usurp the title of Actual Self and there is not the idea to have whatever came before the dilapidation, the neglect, the altering state from What-was to What-is be the Principia, the Alpha identity; rather the hurt to the

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piece is to know both to be able to completely define oneself as neither.

VB: This from a guy who just said I risk cleaving off potential 'understanders!' I think I am entirely on board with this, and thrilled to get such an interesting reading of the poem, but I had to give this several reads to untangle what I think you're saying. Very curious to know what in that particular poem put you here. I don't think of it as so philosophical, or quite as 'utterly removed' as some of the ones in the book, and definitely not as much as some of the newer ones. I mean, it's still there. Slowly decaying, but who isn't. It's still around enough to be pissed off for no good reason.

PD: Well, I've never been one to let what the artist thinks of their work influence me the least little bit. To me, the originator's ideas are little knick-knacks, curios, very appealing to look at, ponder over, but in the end the author-experience/thought-process is obsolete, is rubbish to a reader, isn't it?

VB: I wouldn't say so at all. You don't want to slide into the unbearably dull position of reading incredible works as just some woman's retelling of her problems with her parents (Woolf – and this isn't even straw-manning; I've read articles in major journals whose take is just that), so forth, but every work comes from somewhere. Writing takes hold of whatever it needs to bring itself into being, and part of that can certainly be the writer's awareness, however accurate or

however limited, of what she's doing.

PD: In all honesty, sometimes I do. I love to read Hamsun's *Hunger* as literally a novel about what it is superficially about. I find that beautiful. I feel it a shame there aren't more pieces of literature that simply are 'About a person going to the movies' or 'About someone practicing the piano', simply, not some bullshit 'It's really about this or that construct and this represents this'. That all gets to be unbelievably dull to me. I find it almost sublime when I come across—Hamsun again—something like *Victoria* and would probably slit someone's throat if they tried to 'make it about' something other than what it just appears. That make-believe can get grating, as though there is something so hideous or unliterary about an individual expressing the whisperings of their individual blood.

VB: On one hand, I think any narrative work has to come into being with that exact simple focus — this is precisely what I get to in a bit about how political intention tends to produce awful poetry. Critical intention does, too, of course, because either are diversions from a work being itself. If something's good, it will be truly and definitely about — someone practicing the piano. But it will go farther than that, too; if a writer cares about something, it comes out in the work, whatever that is, whether it's a commitment to some ideal or a love of some person or a hatred or an aesthetic principle. I don't personally see what's threatening about a literary work unfolding on multiple levels, though. Allegory isn't very persuasive, aesthetically, in this era, because it actually does suffer

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from that flattening-out; every piece of it consistently represents a piece of a political platform, e.g. But a good writer will still go beyond the form's capacities even if he's writing allegory – Swift being the obvious king there. The Lilliputians are hilariously awful as ridiculous little people, in the fantastic world of the story, and their status as symbols for certain kinds of small-minded people out in our unfantastic world doesn't detract from that enjoyment. Being able to trace multiple methods of meaning through a work should be part of the enjoyment, to my mind.

With *house*, though, I'm coming after the fact – not saying that in the process of writing I thought of 'house that burned itself down' as less philosophical or less removed, definitely not that I had a notion to make it so or not to do that, but that looking at it now, well outside the scene of composition, it seems relatively visceral, emotionally accessible, ideologically straightforward when I compare it to the whole arc of *mmcn* or my more recent writing. So I am intrigued as to what you think slides it more toward the asubjective end of that spectrum, maybe aligning it with poems I haven't thought to consider as its close cousins.

PD: What's more important to you, how you feel about the poem before its written, while your writing it, or how you feel about it when you look back at it some good amount of time after? Which feels more like what the thing actually is?

VB: To the latter, I'm afraid I have nothing. Not a clue. Ideally, a poem should do far more than

one intended in writing it, so hopefully you never get a handle on what it actually is; hopefully it's always opening up in more ways. As far as how I value my impressions of a poem in the scene of writing vs. later on. . . they're very different things. It's hard to say. I suspect I may have a better answer after I get poetry book #2 together and that will be a bit yet.

PD: In *house* this tension—having examples to take from pre-life, life, and post-life (or post-death) yet still not be able to come up with anything but the desire to find self reference—not to share Self, but to clutch it away like something shoplifted and hardly regarded through some sense of persecution, guilt, anxiety—

VB: —In high school, I was sufficiently known for shoplifting that my friends found me a shoplifting-themed birthday card one year. I never felt guilty about it, though. I maintained high standards of only stealing things I didn't need to make the obscure point that I was striking against capitalist bullshit, and not serving any personal ends.

PD: Good Christ, I shoplifted the living fuck out of the world in high school—only got caught once and I knew it was going to happen. I didn't have such anger or gnashing outward at capitalism or anything as you did—I was more like in Bresson's *Pickpocket* (such an improvement on *Crime and Punishment*, and this is something I do not say lightly, such a more profound rendering of the thing). Too much 'crime as

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philosophy' sort of literature and cinema got in me early on.

VB: I was very philosophical about my crimes. Actually, come to think of it in this context, I saw shoplifting then as a much more definite and more serious act than I see poetry as being now. A department should probably give me tenure some day based on my deployment of shoplifting as a site of resistance to power long before they should give it to me based on whatever it is I'm doing with poetry.

(n.b., no one will ever give me tenure for shoplifting. If I'm wrong about that, though, let me know, and I'll polish up my skills.)

PD: I was always jealous of non-philosophical crooks, though. I've phased out of any crime fascination, really, but when I was more set on the minutia of the crime, the overall point of it aside, I often wished I just wanted what I was stealing—wanted money, wanted books or magazines or whatever, oatmeal cookies, cheese balls. Like writing, for me, it was just something to do. But, now to return mid-thought from this delightful aside

—and to then use all of these examples to form a doctored image of Self to share, to allow, to post in front of others for review with the hope that it, for all intents and purposes, is no more than static, something felt and repelled from, is not only mesmerizing and tantalizing, but causes (in me anyway) some sort of

turmoil, a sense of revolt against I can't quite be sure what.

VB: Revolt/revolting or revolt/revolution?

PD: Revolt/revolution, a disquiet, a turning against myself, but without definition. It's a tough feeling to set down in words. I wish Camus were around, he'd say something pithy for me, yeah? It causes, at once, a feeling that I profoundly know myself and that I am someone else watching someone I know explicitly, but still it is someone else I know, not me.

VB: That's all hugely, probably undeservedly complimentary but I'll take it shamelessly. As I get a bit older, I think I'm turning into an existentialist, which makes a nod to Camus affirming and beyond that, flattering. Plus that sense of disorientation, of being alienated from one's sense of comfortable knowledge through exposure to a more intimate kind of understanding is right at the center of what I want art to do – so there, you're telling me I made art and not just pages of writing, and that is quite a gift to hand to a poet.

PD: It's just there. I'm not giving it to you. Ignore me and it's still there.

VB: Right around the time I was writing that poem in its first form, I was actually in a pretty bad state as far as liking my work and I remember being irritated and frustrated, sitting up very late and bitching

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myself out for writing kid poems. That was the phrase to which I kept returning, kid poems – which now suggests the vulnerability and innocence and freedom from responsibility that I attribute to them, but at the time just meant to me that they didn't accomplish anything. I didn't look at the manuscript for a long while and then when I got it out again, I felt like, ok, these aren't so bad. They do some things. What you seem to be saying is that they do that thing literature is supposed to do that marks it out, the Romantics' sublime or Dickinson's quirky statement that she knows it's poetry when she reads something and feels like the top of her head is being taken off or my own cobbled-together notion that it's supposed to liberate us from ordinary being as people into a vertiginous, unseamed state of being taken over by language. That seems to line up with your descriptions, anyway, and like I said, I don't feel in the slightest deserving of them but I'm not going to argue a bit.

PD: I do like kid poems, though—or what I think you're describing as kid poems. There's nothing in youth to be ashamed of and certainly nothing to tear the art from because it wouldn't get you a Nobel prize or secure you tenure, you know? It probably has an actual soul just for the fact that neither of those things are going to ever associate with it.

VB: You misread me – it's not about youth or having soul or not. Or, no, actually, it is about not having a soul. I felt like the poems were uninteresting, predictable, unadventurous. Not poems that are

kidlike, but poems that required very little to have written and as a result accomplished nothing on the page. I did change my mind, or I wouldn't have sent the ms out, but that was the impression, to clarify it.

PD: I will say, I have a huge disdain for statements like the one you mention by Dickenson—nothing that matters, my disdain, but such enthusiasms, while I'm sure their earnest, I don't like to hear about. What could that mean, you know? What could that mean? I try to picture myself hearing somebody telling me they feel that way about my work and I'd want to blink once, nod once, get the encounter over with as quickly as possible. It's the tarted up equivalent of someone saying "These poems are the shiz-nits' isn't it? It's nice to hear and not nice to hear, meaningless and darling sweet.

VB: Darling and sweet from some random person at a reading – but if someone who knew poetry said that to me I'd be elated, and Emily Dickinson knew poetry thoroughly.

PD: More intimately in *occasional for hollow bones*, this technique of insistence on hyper-specificity—which I quickly want to say I am not simply confusing with 'poetics, generally' with evocative imagery and impressionistic or expressionistic linguistics—in examples and terms offered to describe, to clarify, to pinpoint finds in this piece an almost morbid sense of alone, but at the same time a giddy, ugly triumph in the aloneness.

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VB: This poem serves the same role for book #2 as the apostrophe does for *my maiden cowboy names*, although I don't think it's going to come at the start of the book. It's a kind of fugue, though (riffing directly off D. A. Powell's fugues in *Tea* and *Cocktails* – a credit I'm glad to have the chance to give in print), drawing together the imagistic tropes that will run through the book. It may be useful to say that the voice running this project ('the Magpie,' which is also the book's working title, because I haven't yet come up with anything better) draws partly on Harley Quinn. Yes, from Batman. I'm not even making that up.

PD: I only know that character from Batman The Animated Series, and then only vaguely. The Joker's sidekick, I think. Or I might be wrong.

VB: Yes! Harley is actually the only character to originate on any of the animated series and then transition to print comics. The Joker causes her to crack and then takes her on as his sidekick & (very mistreated) girlfriend. She's a psychiatrist at Arkham and since her name is so close to the word 'harlequin' anyway, he decides to see whether he can induce psychosis in her and turn her into a punningly-named Gotham City doer of antisocial deeds; being the capable villain he is, he succeeds. I doubt I'll have poems that openly reference Batman, but it's a thing where *I* know what's going on, and in moments of uncertainty, part of the question, where does this poem go, becomes, what does Magpie do here, and part of *that* is, what does Harley Quinn do here. (Answer: she

gives someone a big, inappropriate smooch and knocks them unconscious. Or vice versa.)

PD: That rotten Joker. Still, as you kind of point out, she was asking for it with a name like that. I'd think she would have changed her name before entering the professional world just so it would be less porn actress sounding—Katie-Did etc. Since she didn't, I think she was asking for something like that to happen, you know?

VB: That. . . is victim-blaming, and not what I meant about the character, definitely not something I think is going on with the voice of my book. The Magpie isn't asking for the things that happen to her, I can tell you that. I just gave her an adversary, too, in the mockingbird. She's about to go play a losing game of chess when I get on another poem, too, I think. Oh well. It's not like she can tie my shoelaces together for it or anything.

But morbid? Ugly? Man! I thought she was so past all that. Magpie is so much more together and brave than *mmcn* was. Probably saner. She's totally not morbid!

PD: Well, my theory would posit that, like it or not, it's a tangle of your unconscious and conscious, and intimate tangle—'just Louise and her lover so entwined'—so it makes plenty of sense. I can only understand your words—whomever they are about or however rendered—as about strangers, as a strangers words about strangers, and I never substitute my unconscious, self-preserving sense of being 'together'

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to others. I recognize that, when it comes to myself, this sense is more or less bullshit, other than introspectively and self-subjectively. I mean none of the observations in an ill light, just in a light of it seems it's what's being unabashedly showcased.

VB: Or maybe she is morbid, and you can tell me where that comes out.

PD: The reaction to the piece, on my part, begins as purely physical—boredom, listening to someone insisting on making known what was never claimed unknown, imagining a connection needs to be made when one is already well forged and that the mechanics of such a thing need articulation when they are blatant—and in the rattling of specifics and in the mingling of personal self-reference in with reference out to another, I find ugliness. I feel from the verse a sense of superiority, but superiority based only on recognition of something, this mixed with the need to isolate through self-expression of connection to and praise of the object—or person or idea—being discussed, the voice merely recognizing what all other voices are merely recognizing but making individuation out of what should indicate the lack of such a state. My reaction is that I am present to a voice—either in the work itself or in something expressed of its author or whatever—that desires isolation, but to be self-pitying, or merely out of desire to know it might deserve pity, makes a song out of such a desire and then, to cheat, sings the song as though about another. I find cowardice morbid and find the piece a quake of

cowardice in manners artistic, cowardly in a deception that isn't necessary but which is insisted on. I find the piece astonishingly palpable, the life to it quite a pulse—it is something I think I recognize in others and insist I recognize in myself and the urgency to name it stirs in me both the desire to simply name it anything and the desire to name it one thing, correctly. I find it an expression of the unavoidable morbidity and selfish sense of insistent identity that is elemental of being human and central to producing art honestly and at all of value.

VB: That's a series of the least charitable things I've known anyone to say about my work. Since you talk in terms of generalized impressions rather than grounding the claims in specifics from the text, there's no avenue to respond at that level; you've said you don't want to talk about specific lines or phrases or images, etc., but that's where poems happen and what they're made of, so without doing that you can't make meaningful claims about the piece. If you 'feel from the verse a sense of superiority' but don't say where, it's not like I can offer an alternative reading. Good work. Since you come right out and say you're reacting to a voice you perceive 'either in the work itself or in something expressed of its author,' the invective rebounds and becomes a series of some of the least charitable things I've known anyone to say about me. Really don't see another way to take the construction of a cowardly, self-pitying voice with a sense of superiority that produces boredom, then ugliness, and that cheats. The bit about having a palpable pulse and claim that you recognize this voice in others and

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yourself is there, but it comes latterly, uses more generic phrasing, and therefore offers only a weak mitigation of the screed. I suppose I'm glad to have had the chance elsewhere in this exercise to suggest other ways of reading poetry and my poetry in particular.

PD: I'm sorry I offended you, heartily. Yes faith, heartily. I meant, honestly, no trick, just what I said, every statement in full and equal measure.

The more honest one wants to be—the more correct, the more true—the further out of any discernable orbit one moves—a cry for help would not be understood, an expression of adoration, a simple anecdote, an account of personal sensation, everything is ground down into hiss by the insistence on precision.

VB: I think this is why I get compared to Marianne Moore sometimes. But underneath the technique of assembling fragments, not quite as closely as collage and not quite as distinctly as collecting, which we do share, she has presentation as her goal; she trusts words to do that job, too. I think I'm a more intuitive writer, on the model of a tarot reader or a medium, even, rather than a writer at all, and I at least hope I do a better job of taking up the irrational, the inexplicable, and letting it stay there in my poems. I like Moore tons, but I don't think we're as much the same kind of poet as people have suggested to me off and on.

PD: I'm not so familiar with Moore, not enough to consider these sorts of comparisons, but it intrigues me this idea of tarot reader, medium. I'm proceeding as though you mean to say you find credence in such things, that there is actual technique. What is it that a tarot reader does? A medium? I only think of such things as—not shams, not necessarily malicious—but serving some exact function, perhaps of the unconscious, perhaps of some jumble of unidentified need-to-express. What is the tarot reader? What the medium?

VB: I got my first tarot deck when I was thirteen; my dad, who can be quite an indulgent soul, gave me the money to buy it. I have eight now. For a while as an undergraduate, I read semi-professionally, taking clients in my living room, and every once in a while I still daydream about having a table in a bookstore or alternative healing shop or the like. I started teaching myself to cast horoscopes when I was all of seven years old, and it was only some time in my twenties that I realized how peculiar those interests were. It was just a thing I was into from an early age, so those were some of the books my parents got me. In other words, I speak to this world in a personal, experiential manner, and not purely metaphorically – I speak *from* it. Which I think is part of what you're asking here.

PD: You charged money for that? I don't mean that to say I think anything untoward about the Tarot or about charging money, I just wonder about that. With art, overall, do you feel a necessary

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connection to commercial, large or small, gain from it? That is, how do you feel about the business end of poetry?

VB: Hopeless. That's really how I feel. I don't like poetry being class-based; I don't like education being class-based. The realities of resources mean they are, and change there is miserably slow. I get depressed when I hear about poetry readings with cover charges. I don't even read quarterly statements from my press; I feel the envelope to see if it's got more than one page in it, which would indicate we've finally sold enough books that I'm getting a check past my initial honorarium, and I toss it. I run an ad on Facebook, and I look at how many clicks I get, but I feel ambivalent about even that much self-promotion. I have some pretty nice promotional cards that I keep in my purse, but almost never give them to anyone and feel like crawling out of my skin immediately when I do. I love sitting and talking about poetry, but asking people to pay for my book sits art down in capital, where it will always lose. Buy my book instead of getting breakfast at a cute restaurant? Why on earth would you do that? Buy my book instead of someone else's, even – it's not a suggestion I'm comfortable making. I'm sure my press doesn't like this about me, and it's really for their sake that I even run the Facebook ad. I'd prefer that poetry be available without money coming into the picture.

I get asked every once in a while how I reconcile being an intellectual – and I hope that's a tag I earn at some point – with believing in a bunch of new-age

hooah like tarot cards and astrology. (And palmistry, and reading tea leaves, and prayer, and talking to the dead and expecting them to talk back, and on and on and on.) I try to keep my mind as open to the possibility that they could be bullshit as to the possibility that something is legitimately going on. With fortunetelling, it could be that I'm mystically accessing information about the future, out of its proper time; it could be that some (evidently very kind) spirit or divinity is putting ideas into my head or words into my mouth or sorting the cards as I shuffle them; it could be that my subconscious is incredibly smart and incredibly efficient at picking up on subtle cues the other person offers, and at extrapolating from them very far and very precisely. I don't think the last possibility is any less bizarre or less unsettling than any other; if that's what it comes down to, that this intelligent, capable thing hangs out in my psyche, secretly, and can be summoned forth by getting out a pack of cards with pictures on them, that's strange. I don't worry about what the tarot reader or medium does, what I do in reading cards; whatever goes on, it appears to work. Given that, it would be sillier not to believe in it than it is to just go with the process.

PD: I'm in no position to speak on any of this, alas, though find it intriguing. Frankly, I like things even when they turn out not to be on the up and up, find procedures of psychological manipulation or even out and out deception done in the guise of magical wonder really beautiful and endlessly intriguing. Reiterating, I don't think everything is bunk, I just mean that I like the utter bunk, well executed, as much

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as the genuine article and as much as the other alternatives you outline.

You think they, as you say of your work as poet, seek only to set down mystery, to show that which cannot be made tangible? Or you mean that you, like some interpretations of such things, seek to take mystery, take the intangible and showcase it to illuminate, to define it?

VB: For the purposes of the simile as explaining what I see myself as doing in writing, I mean a fortuneteller, a medium, a prophet, in the sense of a person who speaks words that come from a source other than herself. Definitely not a sham, and not speaking out of a need to express, not even a subconscious' need to express, but giving her means of expression over to something not her, not even human. Objects, ghosts, gods. Is that what's factually going on when I write? No clue. I don't worry about that either. I just go with it because it seems to make poems happen, and that's the goal.

PD: Hear-hear.

VB: Illuminating mystery is one thing poetry can do. More importantly, though, I think it can put one in contact with mystery without illuminating it, maintaining it as mystery. There are a number of cool parallels between poetry and prophecy: both can manifest as texts spoken by someone who doesn't exactly lay claim to having authored them; both at once demand interpretation and resist it; both have a

peculiar location in time, with their fulfillment in some future that can't be seen even though you have right in front of you a text that claims to come from it. However, the most powerful potential of both, to me, is that as much as they invite exegesis, as insistently as they pose the challenge of interpretation, they ultimately cast the reader into a gulf the depths of which can't be measured, let alone mapped. If you can understand everything about a prophecy, it's just a prediction. Maybe a set of instructions, even. If you can understand everything about a poem, it's not a poem anymore. This obscure presence poetry has doesn't serve literary analysis well, but it is, to my mind, what makes reading worth doing in the first place. That intractability to explication – as with prophecy – draws one out of oneself, propels one from language-I-use into the unknowable language-as-it-hasn't-been-used, language-as-it-can't-be-used. It bares us as readers to something that will always be bigger than we are – and the most incredible part of that exposure is that this thing that's bigger than any of us, the untapped capacity of language, is already somehow inside each of us. That we can read poetry, through its difficulty and into its obscurity, testifies to that mystery without at all explaining it.

PD: This reminds me that I wanted to ask you if there is a poem (or a 'not a poem') that you can think of, something that claims, or that someone claims, is a poem but that—to go with, for kicks, an aspect of your described criteria—can be known. It is this mysteriousness that informs what—oversimplifying a bit—is and is not poetry?

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VB: I'd say it's key to what art is – as well as the sacred, and the natural, and a slew of other things. It's not all art is or does, but it has to be there. A necessary but not sufficient condition.

PD: I am also curious if when you refer to a bad poem you actually mean something that isn't a poem—if something retains mystery, does not let itself be known, while it superficially keeps the identity of poem, can it be bad?

VB: Can 'bad poem' be translated as 'not a poem' – I don't want to draw the boundaries around poetry and not-poetry rigidly; I don't think anyone could definitively point them out, and more fundamentally, I don't think a singular, clear distinction exists. At the same time, if something gets 'bad' enough, I would say it eventually tends out of the field of poetry (and of art), period.

The example of something that retains mystery and superficially also retains the identity of a poem – my guess is that you're thinking of writing that's obscure just to be obscure, which is a perfect example of how problematic making a distinction between poetry and not-poetry becomes, since so often one person's obnoxious obscurity is another person's compelling mystery. One of the driving debates of the past century, but it shows up with Swinburne, with Dickinson, and a few others earlier than that.

PD: I've often considered there to be a tacit agreement in an art form that some sloppiness is to be allowed so that there can be the game of interpretation—a game I am not necessarily suggesting is worth playing—one either does allow that and so allows for other voices inside their head or else razors around their artwork with diligence and honest need to 'say what they are saying', knowing that this will result in an artwork that may be interpreted, but is not interpretable. You're playing out a third option—and one that I break tone a moment to say I dig on—which is to start the poetry from within that self-indulgence and to invite interpretation as a tool—much like having a view of one's own funeral, but being unconcerned with what is said, with what one sees.

VB: I love the simile – perfectly happy to be morbid, myself.

That interpretation game irritates the living hell out of me – I'm always after my students early in any semester that, no, a poem *can't* mean whatever you want it to mean, not if it's any good. Poetry is extremely precise; often precise about things that can't be talked about precisely, but it is very precise in its methods. You list off a lot of the things poetry is about: death, love, abuse, war, religion, grief, nature, ho hum. But these are all things that millennia of writing and many more of thinking haven't yet explained to us, usefully; poetry's job is to give us ways to come into contact with this material without having to explain it, per se, to give us an alternative approach, through aesthetics. The idea that art should be dodgy or slippery, I think it comes in part from people who

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don't get it and yet managed to get jobs commenting on it, and in part from works of art that are overdetermined in really intelligent ways, which people who don't understand it then get to comment on. 'Queen-Anne's Lace' is actually a poem about the flower, all the way through, and it's just as actually a poem about a very complicated kind of sensual, violent, and still possibly devoted relationship, all the way through. It's not about, say, the industrial revolution. It's not about the afterlife. The kinds of images Hart Crane makes, where you have at least three or four independent meanings for every word, and multiple valences for the image made from them, and then multiple higher-level interpretations for the relation of each image to the rest of them in the poem, *and* the deployment of all the themes through his work – with that sort of thing, I can see where people take it as an intentional haziness, but I don't think Crane or his poems want to be hazy, nor do Dickinson's poems or Shakespeare's. They just want you to read, in a very full sense of the word. If one comes to a piece with that expectation, it offers a very different game, one where writer and reader are on the same team.

PD: Here's a thing I've always slanted at somewhat funny, maybe. There's what I'd not even term short of a disease in this notion of About. Building a bit from our previous statements about poetry as mystery and the ability to express—

VB: Ok, but I'm going to have to pop in and press that mystery is that which is intractable to

expression. I can't let you conjoin the two in a phrase without asking you to make a choice as to whether you're going to treat poetry as mysterious, or as expressive, which I take to mean – based on a lot of what you said – interpretable. They're distinct modes through which it works on us.

PD: No. I disagree. Why on earth are mysterious and expressive (interpretable) in need of this choice?

VB: Because they're mutually exclusive. Even if you want to claim that a poem is expressing mystery or expressing something in a mysterious fashion, that's complexity, not indeterminacy; you have to be able to distinguish in what ways it's clear/expressive and in what ways it's obscure/mysterious.

PD: I add that a poem, whichever one, cannot help but lack this sort of central identity needed for About—I reiterate my idea of the author's conscious consideration meaning just a tick high of nil. When it comes to an audience, certainly a creative audience—an audience not creative scarcely deserves the title, as a non-creative reader scarcely deserves that title—the act of reading is not the act of deciphering what was consciously or aesthetically in the mind of author. It is no more correct to say that the poem is about the Industrial Revolution, meaning that the author meant it as some investigation of the industrial revolution, than it is to say that the poem is about a Flower, in that it was an expression or description or abstraction of flower.

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VB: Not at all what I'm saying. You're missing what I consider the central player in this scene, the poem treated as an entity in itself. The author is secondary. The audience is secondary. The poem has things it does, beyond and without regard to either of those parties. This has to do with what was in the mind of the author only as far as what a medium – a real medium, imagining with me that such exist – says has to do with what's in her mind. It's material the poem uses to make itself. Whether the writer meant to write about the industrial revolution – or anything in particular – isn't the question. It's what the poem actually does.

PD: The poem, if I'm following—and I'm likely not—is about the poem?

VB: The idea is to give over the issue of content and attend instead to being. What the poem is about is less interesting than what it *is* and how, proceeding from that, it behaves.

PD: An individual has no more ability to render About a Flower than About Anything and, for audience, reaction is meant to invoke thought, the poem is a filtration system. If I listen to or read some work and in it see something, extrapolate something, 'make it about X or Y or Z' this is a far more crucial thing than researching and understanding what was on the mind or John Poet.

VB: What makes your personal extrapolation, vision, reading of the poem, important? This sounds solipsistic. If I were a poem, I would be miserable at being put to service to some individual person's 'making' me about whatever thing that wasn't in me. Being a filtration system for someone who can't even be bothered to find out what I am. I immediately think of a situation Kevin Prufer got into where NAMBLA, yes, that NAMBLA, took one of the poems from his first book, decided it was about man-boy love, and used it on their website. For Kevin, this was a bit nutty and involved lawyers and ultimately gave him a pretty funny story to tell, but the victim was the poem, wrested out of what it actually was. Putting aside the issue that poems can't experience misery – because that's how I come to them, knowing it's irrational but insisting that it be treated as through it were true – I believe, and I really do believe this, that we owe them an attentive reading practice. They can't hire lawyers; they can't do any more to explain themselves, and in a lot of cases, to do so would flatten out that mysterious dimension, reducing them out of the realm of poetry entirely. Their nature makes them curiously defenseless, in spite of their difficulty. Because of it, in fact. I want us to be very tender, very delicate, very conscious, in handling them.

PD: Nothing makes it important, as nothing makes the poet's vision important, nothing makes the poem important and if it is a thing with it's own point of view it's point of view isn't important. Nothing makes Eliot liking Durrell important and it's not important that he dug *Nightwood*, doesn't do a thing for

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Nightwood. That the artists want the poem treated nicely or the poem itself wants to be treated nicely or the reader wants to treat the poem nicely, it's all the same. By which I don't mean to inject a random bent of nihilism, just a statement of I'm not arguing with a poet or poem, I never take it/him/her to be espousing anything. Obviously, I treat poems not as little people all their own, so to speak, and even if I did they wouldn't be people who'd have anything in common with me. Wittgenstein would have to be brought in to even give me some perspective on the matter, right? A poem, if it has an identity its own, just as it cannot hire a lawyer etc. it has nothing to say about a reality other than its own—language can talk about language, people can talk about people, the two can stab around otherwise but in the end doesn't this kind of slant make reading a poem sort of like charging a stray cat with misdemeanor loitering? The terms and realities just don't match up.

VB: I haven't read Wittgenstein; I have read a lot of other people, including a lot of poets, from which I feel qualified to speak about poetry's ontological status. Plus, as I said a while ago, I don't even worry about whether the concept is true. I follow it because it causes me to write.

You seem to be suggesting that people talking do not equal language talking, and that, if you follow it out, isn't supportable. That's precisely the kind of untroubled assumption poetry kicks to pieces, precisely one of the places it becomes pedagogical that you've asked about. Philosophy does too, of course; this is

one you can get from a lot of avenues. But someone who comes to a work of art on its own terms learns very quickly that the notions of subject and object we generally operate on aren't all that stable or even entirely accurate to experience.

PD: It is frightening to me to think of poetry that cannot exist without a volume or criticism or historical record behind it, proving it, describing it, whatever. There is nothing in this.

VB: It's there whether you take advantage of it or not, though. Language of any sort, poetry and the whole rest of everything we say, is thoroughly relational – thoroughly citational, even. This is what Emerson is after in calling words 'fossil poems.' The fact that words signify in the first place implicates them in one another, pointing endlessly to one another. Differing/deferring as the nature of meaning. You can't write a fourteen-line poem without the form evoking at least the faint echo of a sonnet; you can't name a character Penelope without evoking at least a faint echo of the Odyssey, or name one Nixon without evoking at least a faint echo of Tricky Dick. It's not like you get to choose whether words connect to their referents or not; they just do. You never get perfect control, but you do as much as you can. As a writer, you can know more about what your work is doing and be better at helping it do that, or not; as a reader, same thing, you can be a better one or a worse one, but you can't just make words mean things they don't or prevent them from meaning things they do.

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PD: Not to continually be going to the side here, but sure you can name someone something without getting this or that association—you may or may not get something, but it's not uniform. Penelope, I think of the actress in *The Shadow* and a shitty old computer game. Name a character H. and I think of the film *Umberto D.* for some reason or another. If a character is called George I think St. George, George and Martha, George Michael, George Jetson, George Jefferson. It's an odd thing to assume everyone has the same reference book or that *the Odyssey*, for example, is the least bit pertinent, tip of the tongue for all folks. Not even to bring up garbled name literature, literature that purposefully sets itself out of identifiable time and place. I fail to see the difference between making words mean just what you want them to and seeing a meaningful thing in coincidental name or word choices—just because it's in Homer, doesn't mean I give a fuck. Maybe the author was thinking of that Penelope when they wrote their Penelope, of course. Words can and do often elicit and connect to nothing. If Penelope is echoed, it's either the writer's idea—they can just write the name, also—or the reader's idea. Even if it happens to be both, that's nothing to do with the fact that language is used to signify.

VB: A few responses:

First, if something actually doesn't elicit anything, doesn't connect to anything, it's not linguistic. Referentiality is the core feature that defines language.

Second, because of that, the complexes of meaning that accrete in words – or in, as I said, verse forms or

images or so on – reverberate with or without conscious intent. Everyone who watched LOST hadn't read the *Odyssey* or any of its skillion derivative texts, but they knew that Penny was the woman Desmond was trying to get home to when he got marooned on the island, and the dynamic, embodied in those characters, can echo for them now. The LOST writers & producers loaded that show up with literature and history and philosophy, and even if the audience doesn't know it's getting fed allusions, it still is. Someone writes a story with a woman named Penelope in it because, in that, she reminds the writer of Penny from LOST – and s/he actually is referring to the *Odyssey*, and accurately, without even knowing it. The body of meaning is there whether you take advantage of it or not.

Third, I did say you can't have perfect control, but you do what you can. There's no point in trying to control for an individual person's idiosyncratic body of knowledge or its lack, but you can be aware of the general range of possibility in language and make use of that, with the hope that likeminded people will get it. This is hardly controversial stuff.

PD: The unconscious thrust of literary creation is to produce some artifact, but moreso to beget thought, investigative, unselfconscious thought. About, in such terms as you mention, either needs to be abolished or recognized as essentially arbitrary.

VB: It's not arbitrary. It's just not. Complex, difficult, untranslatable, impossible to explain in terms other than what the poem gives you – definitely

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possibilities. But what a poem is made of and what it does is not arbitrary. Even poetics that rely on chance like much of what Dada did have specific things they're doing, in those cases, aggressively redefining how language can be conceived to mean. Among other things. It's not a Rorschach blot.

PD: It's a kind of Rorschach blot—that's a better way of putting it, akin to what I meant by saying arbitrary. Following what I was saying about the associative quality of language, that sort of connection—sometimes looked as as also part of a thing's composition—is very much like a Rorschach blot. Also, I don't mean arbitrary as a negation of anything, but as a quality, one that has an identity and just should not be mistaken or covered over in other terms.

VB: Positing language as a Rorschach blot implies a lack of shared meanings, which ultimately implies that we're all speaking idiolects, and that yet again suggests solipsism. Not that there isn't thinking about language along those lines, but it makes reading pointless. Unless what one want from a book is a medium through which to pursue one's own private, circumscribed, self-referential consciousness, and, being written by other people, books seem inapt for that purpose.

Associativity isn't arbitrary. H.D. or Hart Crane – perfect examples of highly associative poets. You have to be able to trace associations through sound, literature, etymology, history, puns, and all sorts of

things to get their poetry, but it's in a very readable, definite, understandable structure. Both of them, too, are poets whose writing practice was highly intuitive, but they produce poems whose logic is crystalline and extremely consistent, just complicated and unusual. They're also poems that are sonically beautiful and have a bunch of other things going for them as well. They are not, however, arbitrary.

PD: It is impossible for an individual creating a literature to know what it is they are creating, they can only know what they think about it, and if someone not the creator thinks about anything, anything at all and most especially anything born of their unconscious and personal response, in reference to a literature I see it as awkward to dissuade them.

VB: You seem to be arguing here that writers are inherently bad readers of their own work, and that other potential readers are at least as bad, maybe even worse, because they interpret via their personal perspectives. How does this tally with your claim just a bit ago that a poem is 'a filtration system,' 'meant to invoke thought' for an audience? That it is 'far more crucial' to 'extrapolate something' yourself out of your personal response to a piece, bringing these pieces of your stance together, than to find out what the poet was thinking – or, to hit again on my terms, more crucial to extrapolate that personal response than to find out what the poem actually has in it? These don't seem like attitudes you can maintain in concert.

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PD: Yes, that is precisely what I was saying. But I don't see the hang up. Perhaps I am just not following you, though. Writers and non-writers are the same when it comes to reading.

VB: I think I figured it out. My confusion was tonal; I read your statement that it would be 'awkward to dissuade' a reader from a reading based on their personal zone of knowledge rather than any additional input and thought of that as a bad thing, where apparently you think that's fine.

PD: It's the villainous side of precision, again. 'I'll tell you exactly what it is about' is equivalent to 'it's about nothing, or nothing to do with you' as the very stance negates the need for the individual reader's existence. By all means tell me what Keats thought about Keats, but I would never suggest to someone they should disregard what they think in exchange for what he did.

VB: *This* stance negates the need for a project like these dialogues. The fact that you have me here, talking about what poetry is and does and how it should be read already testifies that what Keats thought about Keats is of particular value. Surely if someone doesn't know much about Romantic attitudes toward individuality and nature, and they try to read 'Ode to a Nightingale' and don't get a ton out of it, you would want them, at the very least, to know more about Keats' ideas there – if not about his position within the larger discussions of the time, what the form of the ode

is and how his use of it might bear on that, the tradition of identifying poets with nightingales and at a larger scale of troping us as birds generally and how Keats in this poem responds to that history. . . and so on. Here, why ask a poet to talk about these issues if what any reader comes up with, even an ignorant reader who chooses to remain ignorant, is somehow a better engagement of the poetry? Why not send my work to someone who's never heard of me and have him or her write with you?

PD: I am firmly of the position that there is absolutely no need for these dialogues—but that this somehow carries with it that they should of necessity not be done I don't see. I agree that sending your work to such a person as you describe would be an equally valuable investigation, it would lack the superficial difference of point-of-view, perhaps—I wouldn't pretend they were you—but there isn't a need to speak to you, no. There is an interest. As keen as I'd be to know what Keats was thinking, it would not replace what I think of Keats, what I call Keats, that's all I mean. No, there is no need for this, I never ask myself if there is a need for artistic expression, it doesn't need me to have a need for it and, were it a separate, sentient thing, I imagine it would dislike me. I also wouldn't care.

VB: I don't at all know what to do with this statement that a poem's having a project of its own – and, if you follow my claim about even difficult poetry, a project that is eventually discoverable if a reader just comes at it right – 'negates the need for the individual

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reader's existence.' This critique seems to imply, again, that what's important about a poem is that it give some person a vehicle to reinscribe himself, in the form of his personal, idiosyncratic, maybe knowledgeable, maybe not, over the text as it is. That's a violation. It really is. Why should a poem need you? Read *Adonais* (I don't hate Shelley as much as Eliot does) and try to tell me it needs you. Or me. No – it's way beyond that. Or read Spicer's *Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud* or Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*, two of the top works of the past century that just knock me back with their brilliance and pure pleasure, every time I go back to them. They need us as readers, and to be readers, we have to come to them open to whatever demands they make, but they do not need us as individuals. Poems don't address us in that way; they speak rather to our being before and underneath individuality. They restore to us a space we don't even realize we've lost, until we are exposed to it once more in the act of, in Spicer's words, 'stepping up to poetry.'

PD: Poems don't need us. Not as readers. I suppose in some technical sense they need us as writers, and yes certainly I agree they don't need us as individuals, they don't care where they come from in that sense. A poem does not have to be read and gains nothing from being read, regardless of read by whom or for what reason. I think I agree with the first bit of what you are saying there. And even if I semantically agree that they need us as readers, somehow, they don't need us to be one way or the other with them.

Generally, moving from that to another of your

remarks, I wonder about reader and writer on the same team—to me it seems not only, in a genuine sense of both terms, an impossibility, but an absolute waste, a horror.

VB: Why? Here you're going to have to explain a bit more where you come to this for me.

PD: As best as I can is to say, or reiterate, that a writer does not need to ever have anyone read their work to compose it and for it to exist in fullness as the expression it is—unread words are not valueless just as unknown lives aren't dead. A reader, I guess I'd have to allow in a technical sense, needs writers, just because their act requires the object—but the act, itself, is not a necessary one, just an existent one. I find it horror to think that someone could write *King Lear* or *Nausea* or *Prufrock* and think their expression worthless or nonexistent because someone else did not consider it, and a horror unnamable to conceive of this writer not only thinking this but having it be somehow metaphysically true. And the reader, who they are, is not altered or defined by the act of having interface with an object or another's idea—to seep out some of their meaning for a piece of some else's is a nightmare.

VB: First, you're contradicting your own approach – you insist, repeatedly, despite my explaining why this is not the case, that I want to be read, and that I'm writing for other actual people to read me – and I keep saying, no, I'm writing for poetry, as bizarre as that sounds, and you keep ignoring that, not believing it, or something. Then, here, you act like you not only

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side with that approach but violently oppose anything else. If you want to raise these issues in a useful fashion, you have to sort out your own position.

After that, though, it's entirely valid to consider that a work doesn't exist in certain senses without being read – I would also say, picking back up on my notion of writing as a scene of something like devotion, and cribbing from Blanchot, that the writer is him or herself a reader, an interpreter, an investigator, of his or her own work. But Dickinson's poems existed, as poems, in only an extremely anemic, mostly potential, sense between her death and rediscovery. Or Sappho's, between falling out of interest and returning to it centuries later. The physical manuscripts existed, of course, but they weren't operating in or on language, and at that level, they *weren't*. You aren't likely to get anything good out of your pen if you sit down thinking about being read by people, but the force of the work's being is still sited in being read. It doesn't exist as a work except in that moment.

Anyway, I find the notion of poetry as self-indulgent embarrassing, but you're right, it is, and given all this stuff I'm saying, of course I think it has to be, in the way that you seem to be picking up on; you have to give up the notion of poetry as an exchange system like the rest of language in order for it to be poetry.

PD: And to further just a bit with regard to self-indulgence, the same can be true to reading, in fact must be. Which is somewhat along the lines of what I mean when I say writer and reader cannot and should not be on the same team, it's truly an idea to keep them

equal, irrevocably equal, as little to do with one another as is possible—writer is just an abstraction to the reader as reader is an abstraction to writer—while it is true that ‘only one person’ wrote a piece, a reader should not focus on that, there should abstractly be as many authors to a piece as there are readers, as many inceptions as receptions.

VB: Well, that rides more or less in line with the idea that there is no author, as per Barthes and Foucault and so on, which I’m on board with as far as that goes. I begin to think you’re attributing to readers a dopey awe of authors, though – this sense that we can focus too much on there being a person who wrote a piece. I’d say that’s just weak reading, like those articles about *To the Lighthouse* being, bit for bit, a description of Virginia Woolf’s childhood, and therefore constituting nothing more interesting than therapy for her, working through her family issues. (The people who write these articles, I should say, seem to find this plenty interesting; I’m underwhelmed, but I’m not them.) If someone can’t take in information about or from an author as critically as s/he takes in anything else, that’s, like I said, weak reading. But it’s no less silly to draw a line around yourself and preserve some supposed pure state of encounter with a work. There’s no such thing. I can limit myself the moment I open the *Inferno*; I can read the *Inferno* and read heaps of criticism on it and then limit myself the moment I open the *Purgatorio*. I can read all of Dante and then limit myself the moment I open Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Beyond the issue of allusiveness, I can read Hopkins or Swinburne and just

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ignore the things they do with meter, alliteration, stanza structure, etc.; I can read Jorie Graham and choose not to try to figure out what her poems are saying and why they do it in such odd ways. That's also, all of it, just weak reading. To decline to chase literature wherever it might take you – why read at all? If you want to persist as you are without extending beyond that – without letting the work impel you beyond that – we're back to solipsism.

PD: Well, we wouldn't want that having come so far from it. But, teasing aside, I see we have another of those questions, this time 'Why read?' I will say, no surprise, that I do not think there is a necessity and that simply because there is no necessity to do it does not mean there is a necessity not to. I also see little to no value—closer to no value—in one putting that question to themselves, whether the Why read question or the If I am not going to chase it everywhere it takes me, why do it?

VB: The world is full of starving people, abusive corporations, abusive spouses, poisoned water supplies, vanishing species, war, loneliness, cruelty, and every sort of misery. Knowing that, if you're going to sit down and spend time with some novel, I think you ought to have reasons.

PD: I would be, in the face of how you've put things, hard pressed to ever come up with a reason and very wary of someone who has. Personally, I do not read very much and read less and less and less—there

was a stat released that the average American reads one book a year, that's just about me. I write ten times, at least, as much as I read.

VB: The statistic doesn't surprise me, but that you write as much as you do and don't read is a little shocking. Reading is less work than writing for me, so I'd do more of it anyway just because of that, but I feel very strongly that if you're going to put your work out there, the least you can do is give time to your fellow travelers in words as well. Alive and dead both – that's the community that gives us life and sustains it. Plus – if you like words, you should definitely like reading. You shouldn't even need another stimulus toward it.

PD: Reading is a form of thinking, one form of creative thinking, and its absence is not a tragic one, especially not if all that is in literature is observation about literature. I wonder and ask you about your slant on functionality and concrete purpose—are there reasons to read, other than, forgive the odd term, man-made ones? Certainly reading does not extend back forever, not even as far back as artistic creation, not even as far back as language—it is neither an advance nor an intrinsically necessary thing.

VB: Reading doesn't extend back forever. No. But if you see one's encounter with art as enacting the encounter with alterity that founds subjectivity & therefore ethics, that actually is part of the ontological order and to neglect it is to neglect our own being. Within that category, I've given a lot of reasons for literature's particular value, aggregating around its

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effect on consciousness, more or less; if you want to say they're all 'man-made' and dismiss them, you can, but you're going to be pressed to justify human activity on other grounds.

PD: What is it in the form of reading you are a proponent of that is less weak than another? Why is reading itself described in terms of strength and weakness, propriety and impropriety? The defect in reading weakly is what—one does not pursue one's curiosity to an exhaustive extent and because of this they have failed at something fundamental, they are to be dismissed out of hand, the things they say are to only be furthered or corrected? Why such a bent toward reading as technical craft, as 'measure twice, cut once' when nothing is being built that can fall?

VB: The problem with reading incuriously, or even, as I was offering earlier, violently – prioritizing one's individual response to a work over caring for what a work is/does on its own terms – is that it doesn't even necessitate a book. At the level of individuals that seems to concern you, that's pure narcissism. What I'm calling good reading practice relies on and inculcates mental flexibility, personal flexibility, curiosity, attentiveness to that which comes before you, and the desire to understand more rather than less; it's hard to see how there's a question as to why those are good things. If nothing else, it makes books more enjoyable, which ought to be a priority for anyone who writes them. One might, of course, hope there are larger consequences as well, that these habits

in fact 'build' a great deal in the world, and their absence leaves us poorer in every way.

It might just be a failing, but I haven't found ways to control how readers take my poetry and still be able to write things I like. Workshops, in classrooms or through friendships, are wonderful for getting those reactions, but at their best they're sites for clarification of one's own aesthetic more than anything else. Someone says, 'I wish this were more experimental'; someone else – this happened to me, in fact, and was a professor of no small standing – says, 'we can't talk about this poem without knowing if it's about a real person or not,' and you deal with those things however you do in the moment, and then go home and decide whether you want to be more experimental, whatever that means, and whether you think it matters that the poem be about a real person or not and clear about that or not. Sometimes someone says they didn't understand something or they misread something in a way that's really helpful, because that tells you places where the piece isn't doing what you want it to. Or it even offers you a better poem to write that you haven't written yet. For the most part, though, outside of individuals whose responses point up my blind spots or stimulate rethinking that results in me writing poems I like better, readers at large – I don't know what they're doing; I don't think I can; I have enough things to worry about in making a poem without trying to figure out how the multitudes of different people who might someday have reason to glance over it might receive it.

PD: Again, more pointedly said than all of my goings on. I still wonder though at this tension in you,

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this wanting audience and wanting none, this wanting control but finding the concept of such control detrimental. Much of your verse seems to dwell in these tensions, as they exist in many aspects of the individual.

VB: And I wonder why it seems like there's a tension at all. Wanting to write good poems doesn't equate with wanting an audience for me – that's all there is to it.

PD: Alright.

VB: I'm much sadder that my poems aren't beautiful or interesting enough for what I'd want them to be than that people don't get them, if they don't. People can be educated, after all – they can get those Rosetta-Stone moments about someone's work; the poems don't have anything going for them but what ability I have to make them, so I feel a much greater puissance and a greater responsibility doing so.

PD: And here is a subject very near to me, a growl always in my head, the notion of responsibility, creative responsibility. To me it is one of the principia things that removes audience from the equation, or better say regards audience as a thing that exists but a thing properly removed. The only way to show respect to audience is to create without regard for them, to showcase an honesty—about anything, even through the filter of unavoidable elements of deception—to render what one simply wants to render and then to

treat it as foreign, something all control over is relinquished. That is, more childishly put, let the audience be the audience first, then, as honest creator, be the audiences' audience, admit you've created and that now the audience is creating, do not attempt to remain anything except, at most, a vague reference point.

VB: What I'm saying there, though, is still that respect for an audience isn't a concern. It's respect for the poem – caring for it. In fact, readers creating in precisely this sense is what I've termed a violation. That's even worse than the clumsy 'handling' I picture my poems getting that already makes me not want to be in print at all. If people are out there making my poems into things that they are not, if they're reading them, not just without the interest or pleasure or kindness I would, sappily, wish – what I picture as the worst fate a poem could have – but 'reading' in the way you suggest, where some underinformed warping of the text is treated as a more valid approach than figuring out what a poem is doing on its own, then I want to go to my grave. First, just so I can roll in it, and second, so I can be sure never to send any more writing to such an ignominious end.

PD: Yeah man, I see what you're saying. But that is what's going on, it's what's going on right here, you know? Ideal versus underinformed—which I might, honestly, just redescribe as Imaginary versus Real—that's what's happening right here. It is a hard thing to put up with, I imagine, in taking in everything that you say about your work, but I do also wonder

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how much of what you express there is hyperbole and how much the actual extremes of your feelings? From another slant, returning to the question of publication, I want to ask, if you want selectivity in audience to the point your statements seem to suggest, why not just produce your work and control who gets it, why allow all comers for X amount of dollars? I feel there must have been and still must be a considered exchange on your part, you get something you want for something you find distasteful. Reading in the way I'm suggesting and you put quote marks around is the only possible outcome of handing your work to another individual—in reality, not in some Platonic ideal world—just as much as how you read has nothing to do with the desires of the authors whose words you read.

VB: Go back something I said earlier: difficult poetry is pedagogical in its tenor. A poet like Pound, who was my example there, or, to a much fainter degree, one like me, doesn't want a tiny audience; we'd vastly prefer that the majority of people read us and get us. But in a reality where most people in our country read one book a year (and on that statistic, the books read by people in my department alone mean there are thousands of people who don't read at all), it's not going to happen. One writes for one's fellow travelers: for thinkers, the curious, those who will give words their time. The readers at which a poem aims may not exist yet, and it may never have the luck to reach them, but you can't know, so those aren't reasons not to write or reasons to give up on writing adventurously. Ideally, in fact. Poetry is always an attempt at the ideal,

knowing it's impossible and making the attempt regardless – to 'Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/
And eternity in an hour,' to bring Eurydice up from hell.

PD: Your work keeps the stiffness—a word I use as non-pejoratively as possible—of absolute sincerity—

VB: —Regarding sincerity, it may also be useful to tell that I have a poem about anorexia that I read fairly often because it reads well, and invariably, someone will come up to me afterward and thank me in a very moving fashion for saying these things – the sense being that I've made some confession. I wrote that poem because I was reading slush pile submissions for *Pleiades* and we got some about anorexia that were so bad they pissed me off, and I thought, good lord, I can write a better poem about anorexia than that and I've never even been anorexic! And I did.

PD: A very interesting subject, this. Chesterton had it in *The Man Who Was Thursday* that when Professor de Worms came face to face with his impersonator in a public setting that the impersonator had the easier time proving himself to be the Professor than the Professor did. And this is always the case. Of course, the thing of it is that intrinsic fallacy, which has at its base a manipulative basis: a creative, leading-on nature is more alluring than self-identifying. How would one prove oneself as oneself when they have never had to give a thought about how to do so? It's be hard. But a manipulator gives constant thought to it.

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I had similar thoughts to your story about this anorexia poem a lot when I was younger, particularly centering around some poetry by survivors of abuse, torture, really horrific circumstances. There was one poem, a centerpiece of whatever collection was being presented, about a flower being trampled but then growing back. Really, I thought at the time, simple shit, nothing too good about it, seemed any child could've done it.

VB: And yet earlier you objected to my deriding my work by calling it 'kid poems.'

PD: Indeed, and straight to my point, here. The thing is, though, if such verse or such literature were created by someone based on no personal experience but had a fancier aesthetic, a more 'poetic or intriguing set up' but remained born of nothing but mock up, isn't it intrinsically without the same value, whether audience would ever know it or not?

VB: Well, this is Plato's problem with poets, or one of them. But if someone's looking to art for biographical authenticity, they're coming from an impoverished and impoverishing concept of art. For that matter, they're short on an ability to think metaphorically; one of the most fundamental ways poetry appears as poetry, maybe the first, is through drawing connections among things we thought were unlike, say, a sufferer of anorexia and a poet who's never had that problem herself. The person who objects to this may be teachable – in fact, some poem that captures their attention might be key to their

tutelage – but in that state, they're not interested in poems anyway. They're interested in people.

PD: I forget—it's new to me and so my clumsiness doubles twice—we are speaking of poems as things not interested in or revelatory of people but interested in and revelatory of poems.

Further, as you say was the case with your poem, if an actual victim of abuse, torture or atrocity were to read a mocked up poem about the matter and find the phrasing representative of them, truly this is little to do with the author, all to do with the audience—indeed, the audience would have an absolute dominance in understanding, the author'd have nothing to say to them on the human subject, only on the abstract subject of aesthetics. The balance is screwy—it means the world, or at least something intimate, to one who experienced but means nothing to the artistic originator.

VB: What's to say a hypothetical victim of some dreadful condition is going to be any good with words? Bad poetry may be good politics, but it's still bad poetry – and I'd even say it's bad politics. If a work purports to represent suffering, but it doesn't compel a reader aesthetically, it does a disservice to the tragedy it's supposedly trying to bring to our attention. People read 'Sonny's Blues' and end up talking – in my experience, with tremendous, passionate concern – about race and class issues and drug abuse, and they don't do that because it's any story about poor black kids who end up doing heroin, but because it's an ungodly beautiful piece of writing. Hordes of people

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grow up in that scene, and a good number of them write about it; Baldwin writes about it in ways that surpass narrative reportage and cross into art. The rest of those stories and poems don't do, politically, what his do; they don't unseat one from oneself. They might inform, at best; most of them just bore people, even as important as the subject matter is. They don't inspire. And to say that someone has to have actually lived through a situation to write about it obviates speculative fiction, not to mention the dramatic monologue and personae generally. That takes us down to a pop-Marxist insistence that literature represent the proletariat's struggle realistically and do absolutely nothing else, because imagination partakes of the bourgeoisie's decadent ideology. Fill in your favorite movement; none of them, taken as motive for poesis, make good poetry.

PD: Inspire toward what, I wonder? Returning to art-as-function, is it so essential that literature not bore, that it stir inspiration? I am not trying to take your remarks on one thing and wrongfully apply them across the board, so I apologize if I am inadvertently coming across that way.

VB: If the concern in the first place is with art that takes suffering as its topic, and if your criticism is that 'if such verse or such literature were created by someone based on no personal experience but had a fancier aesthetic, a more 'poetic or intriguing set up' but remained born of nothing but mock up, isn't it intrinsically without the same value, whether audience

would ever know it or not?' then I take the 'value' in question to be the work's capacity to inspire understanding of that suffering.

PD: As to speculative fiction, nothing I say would decry it. One who has not been to war does not write about war to talk about war, they use unconscious investigation put outward in a guise to investigate something they do know.

VB: By 'speculative fiction' I was referring to imaginative genres from sci fi to alternate history to magical realism. Your example, though, contradicts what you just raised as a criticism of work like my *anorexia* poem. If a piece written by someone who hasn't been through a situation doesn't have intrinsically the same value as one that does, then someone who hasn't been to war can't write work with the same intrinsic value as someone who has. Yet again – you can't have these discussions if your own stances vis a vis the topics aren't stable, or at least clearly and intentionally unstable.

PD: As to an audience needing to be stimulated, have their attention kept, I don't know what to make of it. A literature is boring, it doesn't positively, stirringly affect the majority so it can get to fuck? Such extremity in this, which I admire, but even your personal reaction to Baldwin you must realize is yours personally, it is not an entity unto itself and someone who is uninspired by it is not lacking in anything, they didn't miss something that is there any

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more than you did and any more than you brought the germ of your own reaction.

VB: No, really, if someone can't be affected by 'Sonny's Blues' – and I say this about Joyce's 'The Dead' and *Ulysses* and *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Macbeth* and *Adonais* and tons of other things, going very far back – they're lacking something. There are a lot of pieces that go into being able to appreciate a powerful work of literature, and most of them, maybe all, are things that you can acquire, so it's not like they're innately lesser beings for it, but that person's short somewhere. And this business with returning to the majority – no. Clearly, in a country like ours, the majority of people, virtually all of them, are not equipped to read difficult work. They're in much better shape to read a straightforward short story about social issues with which they have some familiarity than they are to grapple with something really far outside language's norms, and that's why my undergrads can get into 'Sonny's Blues' immediately and enthusiastically. Something like *Ulysses* takes a lot more ground-laying, and writing like Jorie Graham's or Gertrude Stein's takes even more, and when you can't get much out of them, the problem isn't generally that the writing is badly executed; it's that you have gaps, in knowledge or in experience or in approach/attitude, which, if you're going to get anywhere with that work, need to be filled. But I've been saying all along that you don't ask poetry to save the world tomorrow. It's not accessible for that purpose.

This is not to say that good poetry necessarily

makes good politics. Personally, I'll stand firmly behind this idea, but I recognize that whatever changes literature can make out in the world are small and slow and impossible to predict, and that even at its most efficacious, good poetry is at best slow and subtle politics, and I respect people who critique it on those grounds. I just don't think you give art the job of saving the world tomorrow. You don't even give it the job of making a victim of a tragedy feel better this afternoon. It's wonderful if art does anything like that, but always a side effect. The only thing you can properly ask of art is that it be good art.

PD: You can properly ask it to be art, which it already is. Do you find there to be any need for what I will label a social conscience in art? Do you feel if what an artwork seems to indicate, or even what some aspect of it might literally say or purport, is not in keeping with standards of social justice that the label Art can be lost? I feel a trend underneath a lot of what you say that suggests even if art if unpleasant it should be, we'll say, civic minded, that art—or at least what I'll go ahead and call Good Art—needs to have a moral compass, that nothing desirous of things unjust or ugly could fall in with art. Art needs to be good morally as well as aesthetically—is it fair to say that you feel this way?

VB: 'Social justice' sits art back down in the immediate concerns of day to day life – poverty, injustice, etc. – and I've said, I think that's a mistake. What the work does, though, if someone approaches it with the openness I've been advocating, is to knock

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one out of oneself; it puts one into question, on trial, as a being sure of itself in the world. That's the foundation of the ethical. It's not a question of a writer or a work being 'civic minded,' but an ontological feature of art as such.

PD: It's forever an unsettling aspect of literary creation to me and I think it again touches on the trend toward letting the conscious mind dominate, the conscious mind define. Certainly faux histories could be very artfully rendered, but that they should ever efface or indeed think themselves able to replace genuine expression, however 'un-artful' is curious and disquieting.

VB: The question the past century has rendered unanswerable, though, is what 'genuine expression' is. Language is already artificial; it can't escape that. It's an interface, a technology, a *tekhne*. It has no necessary relationship to its referents or its users. All histories are stories; they're all crafted, all false, all poetic in the etymology of *poesis*, making. If Plato wants to ban poets from his republic because we write about things we haven't been through, we eventually find out he has to ban speech.

PD: That lousy Plato. God, why doesn't he just take a walk? I can't go ten minutes without him throwing some bullshit in my face about his goddamned Republic. Good luck to him is all I have to say.

For my part, I often wondered why I reacted with

negativity or disdain to verse created by someone who had suffered, why I belittled by insisting on abstraction born of nothing but my baseless aesthetic contempt, and to this day I am shamed a bit, find that such thinking was no different than dismissing the victim, than indeed adding another humiliation to them—‘you’ve suffered and have something to say, but fuck off, what you say is worthless to me, I prefer my invention’. But, that’s me and not the same as what you are describing. To your story, I wonder do you think you even wrote a poem—returning to that little word—‘About’ anorexia at all? Let alone a better one? I don’t ask antagonistically, but because it seems to so directly exemplify what we were before going around on, the mystery of verse, the substance of it, what one can know individually or not and what one can express artistically or not.

VB: Definitely. It’s ‘work of laura.’ Not my most brilliant title but there it was. When I went back to that one after not having looked at it in a while, it turned out to be about a passionate wish to disappear into writing, too – the girl ends by envisioning herself become so thin she can fold herself up and slip into the pages of her diary, which, when I wrote it, was just how the poem wanted to end, but clearly has a lot of resonance with my approach to artmaking. At the time I wrote that poem, I had very little of this thought out, too. Little to none. I would be surprised if there weren’t several more things happening in that piece as well, but those two definitely, and specifically, and non-arbitrarily, are going on in that poem.

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PD: What is your most brilliant title?

VB: Hmm. . . I think *Apostate, Sing This World Forth* is ok. It sounds like a fruity poetry thing to say, but once you understand the project, it's actually what the dissertation is about. And it's iambic so it's got a good insistence, appropriate for an analytical text. I thought 'with the bare hands' and 'the bursting miracle' were very decent for their poems.

PD: Of my work, there is a tie between two novels I wrote—shorter pieces—*September from its grave* and *in descending order, alphabetical*—though I admit it was my wife that fixed that title, I was going to call it *in descending order, alphabetically* which is so much shittier. Best title to anything ever though belongs to Dylan (actually, I think he owns the top fifty most brilliant titles, easily) which is *It takes a lot to laugh, it takes a train to cry*. What's your favorite not-by-you title, too, as long as I've got us briefly on the subject?

VB: Hands down, Jack Spicer is the master of this in my opinion. *Apollo Sends Seven Nursery Rhymes to James Alexander. Fifteen False Propositions Against God. 'Rimbaud Is a Gorilla With Seven Teeth.'* 'They Came to the Briers and the Briers Couldn't Find Em.' *Lament For the Makers*. I couldn't pick among them. *Company of Moths* and *Let Me Open You a Swan* stand out among more recent poetry book titles. *Splay Anthem*. Pound using 'The Lake Isle' makes me smile.

PD: Alright, but I did want to return to what I was remarking about sincerity in your work, that your work maintains the stiffness of sincerity, as I think I phrased it, but somehow does it by playacting that it is its own audience.

VB: You sure it's playacting?

PD: Yes, I am. Absolutely certain. That is, unlike Anne Michaels—who can take a personal history not her own and infuse it with such strikes of abstract to make it nobodies, makes it utterly interpretable—and unlike (to pick an easy name) Eliot—who's so keen to insert Sanskrit, Latin, tidbits dragged out from books he really seems to hope he's the only one who's ever read, taking great pride in the ability his work has to distance—

VB: He really doesn't do this, I promise you. As long as you're not Shelley, if you're reading poetry in the first place, Eliot is totally on your side.

PD: Sure he does, sure he does. But I don't think it's something to defend. Eliot I've always felt admits and relies on and adores the distance, understands the distance. Eliot reminds me of everything small, petty, mewling and unfortunate about myself, but he never seems close, I think he finds intimacy ugly or else wants it to be rhetoric, a Theory of Intimacy. He wants to express and certainly he wants to, for lack of a better word, investigate, but to him it doesn't matter whether it's the shadows on the wall, the reflection in the water or the hands

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themselves. He's one of my heroes, one of my most dreadful heroes, and he's terrified of himself, probably rightfully. He's a scardy-cat, he's so terrified of himself he hides wherever he can, hoping he'll get lost somewhere in his verse, be mistaken for it.

VB: There's a lot I could say here and a lot I've already said – and it matters, because Eliot is not only a touchstone for modernist practice, but he's also probably the foremost face in my familiar compound ghost, so how one deals with his work has a lot to do with how one deals with mine. But you'd have to point to particular lines, specific strategies in his poetry, etc., where you see some of these things for me to respond meaningfully and we don't quite have time (space? whichever) for that here.

PD: Blessedly you're right, we have neither the time nor space—nor would I be able to follow you where you went. Anyway, as non-intellectual as it is to say, I don't find the things I refer to in specific lines or strategies, I don't even really dig on what you mean by those things. So, Eliot we will put to one side, rightfully. Why does how one deals with Eliot's work, though, have anything to do with how one deals with yours?

VB: Like I just said – he's a touchstone for modernist practice (and therefore for postmodernist as well). Along with Pound, Williams, H.D., Stein, Bishop, probably Hopkins, probably Moore, etc. etc. – to read poetry written since 1910, you have to come

through those folks. The critical statements alone by Pound, Williams, Stein, and Eliot made poetry possible in ways it had not been, previously.

Eliot in particular is among the poets who speak most clearly in my work. His take on personality, his vision of what it means to write in the first place and why we should care about art; his deployment of polyphony, his swing among various registers for his poems' material, the specific registers on which he draws – myth, archaeology, bodily vulnerability, music, gardening, demotic modes of speech – they're the same things I'm writing from. We're both Missourians and while he came from a family that looks more high-brow than mine, he still grew up culturally very removed from the international aesthetic scene in which he ended up moving; it's trade lane and cattle country, and it gives you a different perspective on things. So, I sympathize. I find his accounts of poesis and his arguments in its favor persuasive.

PD: Your verse I found to have an almost parasitic quality: it doesn't invite in, it inseminates, uses the unconscious construction that is inherent in any reader to create its echo chamber, its little hollow where the precision that can so completely confound as something near to meaninglessness begins writing itself out again in whatever associative subtext the viewing mind can conjure.

VB: Well, I don't want to be parasitic, since that would mean I was taking something from people for my own purposes – wait, no, in the sense of using material from other people's lives and words and

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thoughts, I'm a complete cannibal. But that's taking in the sense that sharing movies on torrent networks is stealing. In the scene of reading, I don't want my poems to parasitize people, I don't think, at least no more than anything one reads saps time and attention that might go to some other project instead.

PD: I meant parasitic both as a compliment and as something—when it comes to poetry I find, for lack of another word, effective or alluring—rather necessary. Literature should be a parasite, it is something, from wherever it originates, that is infused, infested into the workings of another, it is a separate unconscious put into an audience's conscious mind, or at best it is, and at worst it's a separate consciousness put into another unconscious—parasitic in the sense that it needs to nest and bud elsewhere, find its life outwardly in some other thing. Should it be parasitic in that it saps from someone else? I'm of a mind that yes it should, it should alter for its own purposes—purposes, I will add, that are not the conscious intent of author or originator. Poetry, any literature, should alter and this cannot be done through audience choice—one does not chose to be altered, to be infested, there is nothing symbiotic about it.

VB: I see your elaboration of the conceit, but I still disagree. All this interest in poetry doing some particular thing for particular readers just isn't a way I come at it, or want to. What poetry should do. . . it should represent radical independence – from value, from total captation to meaning, from habit. It should

shake up language, mess around with its borders, its methods, its connective tissue. But given those capacities, what it does to the actual people who encounter it – hopefully shakes them up, too, and hopefully in some (very) ultimately positive way, but the position of poetry at language's edges and in its unplumbed interstices makes these possibilities necessarily inchoate. An incredible poem might not do anything at all that you ever see, might not be recognizable as an incredible poem or as a poem at all. It may never hit the right people in the right moment; it may hit them, and its being as art be precisely in its apparent failure, 'succeeding' in some obscure way we will never perceive. That's an extreme example, but it's where my thinking leads and I follow the thought even in its more bizarre implications. The vagueness and tentativeness and approach by negation are intentional; to preserve for poetry the full reserve of its potential, one has to cede one's particular desires for it.

PD: What is shaking up language? What connective tissue or borders and how are such things determined? I imagine you are speaking metaphorically, of course, so feel free to ignore the questions. I agree that an incredible poem, so to speak, might not ever be recognized as such, for whatever this is worth, and especially if poems can be quite easily dismissed out of hand, which they always are by everybody—me and you included.

VB: I begin from a perception that our ways of speaking are inadequate to our world. Speech being always an approximation, the more approximate it gets,

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the more habitual, the less accurate it is. Disturbing those habits returns us to a renewed capacity to see beneath the structure of language.

Immediate hackles raise at being accused of insemination, but then, I don't know, maybe that's an interesting queer way to look at the poet's role. That one I'll have to mull over for a while.

PD: I think I see inseminated in the same light as parasitic. Which is perhaps an odd revelatory glimpse into my thinking.

VB: That sounds like it's heading into opportunities to psychoanalyze a fellow writer, and I only do that to my students, and then I don't tell them about it. You can keep your parasitizing semen to yourself. I'll let you have all of that.

PD: What differentiates your students from your peers? Or from your 'fellow writers', as it were, peers or no? If you wouldn't psychoanalyze Woolf, why would you psychoanalyze Smith—which is, of course, the same as psychoanalyzing Woolf, in principle? Or far more interestingly, where is the differentiation between student work and artist work? If you were handed a book of poems by a student and gave it a look, would you look at it the same way as if I handed you a book of poems 'written by an Italian poet from the thirteenth century', as Dylan might say?

VB: There's a confusion of referents here. Critics who offer biographical readings of a writer's

work are not doing the same thing as a teacher who somewhat naughtily interprets her students' sometimes very revealing statements. I don't find readings of novels or poems that limit themselves to the biographical illuminating, and I expect critical work to illuminate, and to prioritize the body of work assigned to the name 'Virginia Woolf' over the life in which a person was born, ran around Bloomsbury, wrote some books, and eventually drowned herself. As a teacher, your role isn't nearly so focused.

As to the latter half of your question, I don't think anyone would honestly say they would come to the work of an unknown – and specifically a student, with the fraught power structures that implies – with the same attitude they bring to canonical work; they can't even come to it with the same base of knowledge. I regard my students, creative and otherwise, as potential peers, and for that matter I regard writers, living or dead, as potential peers until I get to see some of their work and think about it. It's all on the spectrum somewhere, from amazing to terrible and back again, sometimes amazing in some respects and terrible in others. And so on.

Earlier you said 'Echo chamber' and this is an interesting term, because that usually has negative connotations, too, but it's probably accurate. In the sense that *poesis* is making, and in the sense that ecopoetics is then 'making a world,' which is how Joan Retallack draws out that term, I'd agree that poems should make a reality, a moment of being in language that's complete in itself even if it's just the space of one lyric, and that's what an ecopoetics does. This is Adorno's take on sad books, too, that even work as

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bleak as Kafka is ultimately hopeful, because it posits a reality different from our own, and so it offers possibility itself, even if its particular alternate vision is very dark. I would definitely want for my poems to do that as well, to be places where things that don't manifest elsewhere, can, and maybe to let the reader go on to make other as-yet-unknown moves in the world we actually live in. You have to have a pretty assertive poetics to do that, I think, a pretty confident one, and this is why I'm a bit uncomfortable with the idea of parasitism; if, on top of the rest, I'm taking something from the reader to feed myself, even in the way of agency or ways of thinking, that seems a violation I don't want to perpetuate.

PD: Picking up a bit more on a side point, here, I've never bought such talk about Kafka or anything particularly bleak. There's a kind of mocked up semantic to it all, and I'm never one to suggest—certainly out of nowhere—that a literary expression that is of hopelessness, or something 'negative' at least, is doing so or should be doing so to slyly make the opposite point—it feels silly and devalues the work, it would be like saying Hamlet may seem like a downer, but all of the fucked up people die, right? Or—to touch on Eliot again—'Don't you think Portrait of a Lady, despite all, is such a romantic, uplifting piece? There's an odd trend—again in very lay and unestablished circles—toward having to suggest that non-uplifting things are uplifting, that terrible things are not terrible, that harrowing things are really expression of their opposites due to their being

'unrealities' or alternatives. 'There shouldn't be, I don't think, much value in literary alternatives because it posits that some actual, definable absolute of reality can be deciphered and extrapolated from, that one can look and actually see and actually express reality but chooses not to—it's all very fishy.

VB: Just a very short while ago, though, you were valorizing 'genuine expression.' That's locating an 'actual, definable absolute of reality' that 'can be deciphered and extrapolated from,' and locating it in human subjectivity as it operates language – the most perfect execution of artifice, perfect precisely in its ability to appear as natural. You can't have that both ways, at least not in the same piece of thinking.

PD: Oh, I think I can, I think I can. Moreover, I think I have no real choice but to, otherwise I'd hardly be thinking. I like to cram as many ways into as few pieces of thinking as I can, it makes me feel cool.

VB: Cool won't get you very far with poetry. Poets are notoriously uncool people, other than Byron, and poetry is a notoriously uncool medium.

Regarding Kafka et al., my point (Adorno's, to retain credit where it's due) isn't that there's anything sly about bleak literature, but that hope ends up being an ontological feature of any artwork, regardless of its ostensible content, because in differing from the world as given, it affirms that the world as it is need not *be* given. It's not that *The Trial* has some secret utopic truth hidden in its pages like a cheerful *Da Vinci Code*; *The Trial* definitely tells us that the world could be

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worse – that we could be worse off than we are. And its message is not to be grateful for what milder misery we have, either. In this view, the capacity for bleak art to bear hope is that in showing an alternative at all, it loosens the idea that whatever we have, good or bad, is necessarily so.

PD: Well, I'm not touching that, but will keep Adorno on my list of things to avoid reading. Do you ever feel a little bit yucky reading Kafka—not because of the content of the work but because (one)—which I think you've said is your personal hell—people are more often than not only reading and interpreting his work knowing full well it is literally unfinished, not even all the first pages are in, so to speak, and (two) because his own wish was to have it destroyed, remain unread? I feel like a grave robber, but it doesn't bother me. How, though, does Adorno or you or anyone exactly go about saying what is being expressed in *The Trial* when *The Trial*, really, doesn't exist?

VB: I feel more sympathy for the living work than the dead writer. We wouldn't have George Herbert's poems, either, if Nicholas Ferrar hadn't decided more or less unilaterally to publish them after Herbert's death. I sort of assume that you get over worrying about your work being good enough or not after you die.

As for how one approaches an indeterminate work, that immediately begs the question of how anything can ever be considered finished. Robert Graves, if I remember, edited many of his poems quite heavily

years after they were published when he was doing a collected. Plenty of writers, you can look at many (maybe all) of their pieces as iterations of a single project, each 'different' work being a kind of revision of the last one. It can present you some interesting problems; Sharon Cameron works through that thinking better than anyone else I know in her book on Dickinson, *Choosing Not Choosing*. You go with what you have; you maintain an awareness of the regions of uncertainty, but those are there with any piece of writing, really.

Adorno finds this capacity in bleak art, but I'd point out that what I've been saying about difficult poetry, both the difficulty that can be parsed with effort and that which remains mysterious, operates in this same way (so this isn't a side path at all). It demonstrates that language isn't natural any more than, say, poverty is; by its being in relation to our everyday ways of speaking but in a relation of differing from them, poetry puts habit itself on trial. Do I want people to talk like my poems? No. Do I want them to talk like *80 Flowers*? God, no. We'd have no idea what anyone was saying. The connection is faint, and a result of what poetry is rather than what one wants it to be; if anything, it's a hermeneutic principle that lets us imagine a way to define poetry: if a work has this destabilizing effect on language, it partakes of the poetic. The bind there is that language is so complex and the type of effect I'm indicating here so faint that in reality we couldn't trace such a phenomenon back to any text. This is the kind of intentionally, emphatically vague desire I do have for my poetry, and for poetry generally; it doesn't even serve as a yardstick by which

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to gauge whether anything I've done is good – or is even poetry! – but permits me to justify my love of the art, and, concomitantly, the time and attention I give it, and it does so without putting the work in the service of an external goal. That's what cheapens these things, to me.

PD: Who are you justifying your love to—why do you feel you have to and, out of curiosity, has anyone ever really requested of you that you do so?

VB: I'm close to \$170k in student debt as of this writing; I spend so much time doing poetry that I haven't turned my TV on in years, plural, which makes small talk at dinner parties awkward, to say the least; I have no guarantee of getting a job when I'm finally out with all these letters after my name; no one reads books in this country, not even, apparently, some of the people writing them; the possibility that what I do and what I advocate people care about will have any impact on culture is, by my own admission, uncertain and at best possible only far into the future – and this is all in service of poetry. I get frustrated with these situations and people ask me why I don't do something else, fairly regularly.

PD: If you theoretically investigated your love for art and found it could not be justified, would it have any effect on you?

VB: Since looking harder at it has only – thankfully – shown it to be more justified rather than less, we don't have to walk up to that precipice.

PD: The baleful *vespers*, *flown* would be the seemingly most unguarded expression of what I've read, but truthfully the words remind me of the secretiveness everyone not only does keep from everyone else, but wants to, specifically from those it wants to—as I said somewhere earlier, beseechingly and surrenderingly—couple with. The drive in this piece does not seem to be of any two identities toward an intimacy, but of one identity desiring to create what to the other will not only seem to be, but as much as is possible Be an intimacy, so that this other when viewed from a point of removal—from even abstractly 'after the observer's destruction', 'after the utter destruction of everything'—the other can be a perfect little instrument to study itself with.

VB: Wait, what? What's being kept from whom in this poem?

PD: For my money—my personal disdainful take on sex aside—what is being kept one individual from the other is intimacy, a moot of intimacy offered in its place. Similarly to the tension I've been going on about, wanting to create something with audience in mind that is meant to be unregarded—this representation in physical act has the same rhetoric to it. There is as much honesty, or at least unguardedness, offered as there is interpretation, suggestion given in each expression. It's something akin to someone in one moment admitting they are a liar and somehow thinking this cleverly makes any

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deception they offer afterward honest, because they've admitted that's what they're doing.

VB: Ah – I think this is going to crash on the shores of our incommensurable notions of authenticity. 'vespers, flown' is, after all, set in a BDSM scene. People are dressing up in clothes whose only showplace is the bedroom or, for adventurous sorts, a fetish ball, and they're playing out wholly artificial, predetermined roles as some kind of route toward intimacy. The whole practice is predicated on an idea that all human encounters are only, at best, a moot of intimacy, that to interact is always and inescapably to lie. Another of these disguises that reveal truth, and in the process reveal the artifice in all approaches to truth – like 'work of laura,' like all my persona poems, like, I've argued, poetry as a whole.

PD: The only thing I say here, and it's not so much in response, that has to do with the notion of disguise revealing—I brought it up via Chesterton and you've brought it up about your own work—is that I personally, in reflecting on it, don't think I would include the word Truth in the statement—disguises that don't disguise but reveal, full stop, I don't think revelation implies truth. Truth, for me, doesn't enter into it and is a pointless and imaginary thing to imagine could be disguised or revealed. You don't really think there is truth, do you, out of curiosity?

VB: I think you're getting a little late-nightish on this one. Truth, capital T, is another thing I just don't worry about. Lowercase t, truth is a perfectly

serviceable term for things that can be revealed.

And *vespers* doesn't seem to me to be a poem where anyone wants to study anything. Or is that what the kids are calling it these days?

PD: It seems to me that's all they want to do—and that whatever the kids these days or any days want to say about it, wanting to make oneself an object of study and to be made an object of study is what the story's always been.

VB: For the writer who wants not to be but as a writer, a wrinkle in the world that words pass through, visibility represents a failure. And, as I said early on, you can't reduce me only to my being as a writer; I still want many more things. In that particular role, though, neither I nor the people I write nor the *poems* I write are after attention, however studious. We want to be as our possibly inscrutable selves, vaguely defined; the opposite of being studied, in fact – having our attention given over to a devoted study of alterity, study in the sense of getting to know something (in this case, poetry and the world, neither of them fully amenable to being known), and in the sense of an artistic study, a sketch, a recording of some view, a testimony of having been absorbed in observing.

PD: The thing that scorches in your work, that allures as much as it disquiets, is that it entices one closer, allows any probing, any investigation, hoping that it can be known only to insist that the knower then vanish.

VB: Both moves, to me, seem only polite.

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