

GONG FARMER, SHIT STIRRER THE MAIDEN OF GRIEF

LISA ROBERTSON IN CONVERSATION WITH MADISON BYCROFT

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develops their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process. In trying to picture what result the artists' work is getting to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

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DEC 7: Madison Bycroft [MB] to Lisa Robertson [LR]

I just bought your book *R's Boat*. It should arrive today or tomorrow.

I'd be interested in hearing a little bit more about your territory and recent experiments, in which ways the indexical method developed.

One film for the show is finished. *Jolly Roger & Friends*. It is 60 minutes long - so it's movement and looping becomes a clock. TIME PASSES. It is kind of 'about' not being about Mary Read and Anne Bonny, and thus is implicitly about them, somehow, anyway. Anne and Mary were two pirates who lived in the 18th century, who had to pass and were read as men for most of their lives. There is a lot of historical material that focussed on this, their sexuality, were they in a secret relationship? who knew the "truth", blah blah blah... I wanted to make a work that wasn't about revealing them yet stayed with them, and at the same time questioning the idea of 'them', their identities, as something that can be revealed at all.

I grapple a lot with ideas of form and content and surface and interior, and even though I know that these things fold into each other still feel that they are useful, strategic terms. The Jolly Roger (the pirate ship flag) could be read as a kind of surface to gather under. Those gathered de-individuate into a temporary solidarity - the flag becomes a sack or veil in which pirates, or now, anarchists, anti-fascists, anti-capitalists, and/or anti-racists could/can meet.

Each scene in the *Jolly Roger* starts "on deck", "in the frame", "on stage" and then moves into the cabin, "below deck", "outside the frame", "below the stage" or in the wings.

I am looking at Novalis' *Hymns to the Night*, Medieval bestiaries, and my diaries that have been sent from Australia.

Much love, and so glad Holly and Anna can help. They are totally wonderful. x

DEC 20: LR - MB

Madi, could you send a link to the finished film? It would be useful for me to see. But what you say about looping parallels my own treatment of my indexical materials. (I was working on this in 2003, so my account of the process will be pretty stylized, exaggerated, what have you...) The *R's Boat* project started when I was asked by the special collections at my old University, Simon Fraser, for my archive, which is to say a load of paper ephemera, left-overs. Which I agreed to. You make deposits of drafts and notes every few years. It's a strange contract, and very much so back when they first asked me, since I was still a pretty young writer. I was about to move to France so it seemed like a lucky opportunity to have safekeeping for my papers. I decided to include my writing notebooks, then

about 15 years worth of them. First I thought I should reread them, in order to cull out anything too personal or intimate for the archive, and also as a kind of leave-taking of the material. So I read through the heap of them, using a simple reading screen— to transcribe all sentences written in the 1st person. Afterwards I had a long, fairly interesting but not super interesting list. What I liked about it was the mediocrity of much of it. Purple, self-pitying, bored, everything was there. These were not “literary” sentences. So I wanted to find a way to use them leaving in everything that was bad— I looked for a structure that could include everything. First I alphabetized them. It was immediately better to read. I wanted to add some different material, interrupt the list with something else. I tried many things and nothing worked. Then I had a dream one night that I should interrupt the list with itself. So I did. I spliced in the list in its original sequence, between the alphabetized sequence. So then I had a text that rhymed with itself, a loop. Everything was doubled, but in a sequence difficult to pick up on since it was pretty long. Sentences spoke among themselves. So that’s the loop I invented.

I actually started typing this in an airport on the way to Scotland a solid week ago. Then I forgot it. Now picking up, suddenly startled— we must get this underway!

I have not read Novalis. Do you know Djuna Barnes’ bestiary, *Creatures in an Alphabet*? (you probably know her novel *Nightwood*, with the famous chapter *Doctor, What of the Night*?) Once I tried to memorize it. *Creatures*, that is. I also tried to memorize Young’s *Night Thoughts*, another strange text about insomnia, melancholy and the night... Those were both projects I was obsessed with before abandoning. What about the life of abandoned projects? Another sort of night... which is maybe a kind of awning?

xox Lisa

tomorrow of course is the longest night...

DEC 25: MB- LR

<https://vimeo.com/292566991>
Password is MB87

No pressure to watch the whole thing. It’s a bit epic... Sabrina did subtitles, I am also working on this again for the show, so am thinking of it as first edition. I’ll respond in next days! (Doing partners family Christmas biz).

DEC 28: MB - LR

Hi Lisa.

When I received your last email I was in London, shooting for the new film (tentatively titled *Night Soil*, or *Go, Going, GONG!!*). Over the past year I have started working with younger people. Paul, a ten year old piano accordionist and I composed an unmetred, un-scored “song of revolution” for a performance (the song culminated in an abrupt dismemberment of my clarinet with an exhale/cry from the accordion). Also, in *Jolly Roger and Friends*, Marguerite Porete is played by a 14 year old person.

Which discourses enter aging, and which ones exit? Dragon discourse, for example, thrived, but then was hidden for a while, and now returns. As I have aged I have felt the pressure to become something more concrete. I wanted to work again with younger performers, contra the maturity of “enlightenment”. I advertised five roles (Nyx, Shadow, Larva volta, the furies, the vigil) but had too many enthusiastic responses and couldn’t say “no” enough. Now, there are eight characters of a night, undefined.

Script taken from my diary:

*Tonight there was an answer on the answering machine that said that one of the goats had fallen in the well. Well, now we will have to get rid of them.
I’m sad about the goats.*

We shot on the Hackney Marshes with puddles, mud, fog, coloured smoke, full moon, the longest night! And an absence of the HD that light gives. The sun set quickly, and so there wasn’t any time for second takes - discouraging through denial the whole, the closed, cured, or complete.

Reading my teenage diaries, I was surprised by their pretence. Even though they announced themselves as ‘secret’ or ‘private’, they were clearly written to be read by someone other than me, (or maybe then I knew it would me, returning later, a different person), a kind of performed confessional that tried to self-fashion in the most amiable light. Mostly, I am written the hero, and yet now I read the same character as a blank canvas reflecting alignment to the plot designed to gather applause from others. Sad face. I am thinking about your use of the word cull and wondering about the relationship of censorship to the illegible or delegitimate, or further, its relationship to shit or excrement or night soil. As a sanitation practice. What surfaces? (Shit floats). I read that Marguerite Duras used to work for a board of literary censorship for the Vichy regime - a position that became a platform for her own writing!

The diaries follow a strange devotional style, dear Bob, dear George, dear Roger, a phase of dear God... my purple diary of 2001 went as far as providing an appendix of persons. “If you haven’t read my previous diaries, and come across a name you haven’t heard of before, check the appendix at the back”. (note: intended audience confirmed. But then again private is seldom carried out in isolation).

Derrida too, wrote somewhere that the auto-affective is always hetero-affective, the “I” is always more than itself. I infected in anticipation of an outside. It is a body of writing that protrudes out of itself, overhangs, sags. It is its own muffin top. Maybe all “self” writing is.

I like that a dream hinted to your method. Helene Cixous wrote, ‘*To go off writing, I must escape from the broad daylight... I do not want to see what is shown. I want to see what is secret. What is hidden amongst the visible... I cannot write without distracting my gaze from capturing. I write by distraction.*’ This resonates with me again and again. I often put things together out of a sort of sympathy. I feel they are similar, and yet don’t know why, unable to articulate a likeness lying outside cognition. Like a pun that doesn’t recognise itself in the mirror.

I am not sure about abandoned works. But I am sure that abandon is one of my favourite words, with its relationship to the banner that bans, the proclamation and the

outlaw, who I would say is definitely a figure of the night.

Unfortunately, I haven't read Djuna Barnes' *Bestiaries*. I tried to find it with no luck. I went to Chantilly house North of Paris though and looked at a different bestiary, *The Liber Floridus*, by Lambert of St. Omer. The pages were made of animal skin and were heavy but transparent, ribs were stitched together. Diaries and bestiaries share an iterative format, a certain linear order, and a kind of magic masquerading as truth, where masquerading is its own truth.

The Bonnacon is a beast, like a bull, that uses its dung as a weapon

The owl is a dirty animal that prefers darkness to light
The beaver is hunted for its testicles; it castrates itself to escape.

The he-goat is a lascivious beast, known for its lusty nature. This nature makes the he-goat so hot that its blood can dissolve diamond.

I have revisited *Nightwood* though... it is incredible! Thank you:

Yes, we who are full to the gorge with misery, should look well around, doubting everything seen, done, spoken, precisely because we have a word for it, and not its alchemy

I read this as I read in *R's Boat*:

C Bergvall says space is doubt
- what emerges then?

Much warmth en route to Isle of Skye - where I hope to film final scenes with fake nose wax and a score of grunting.

JAN 4: LR - MB

Last night I had a dream in which I had "finished" a "manuscript" which meant I had bundled together a thick sheaf of paper. I was to deliver it to you. The "manuscript" had been "corrected"- there were many additions, hand written tightly in black ink on oval shaped panty-liners, which were attached by their adhesive backings to the edges of the rectangular pages. The effect of the written-upon oval panty-liners, ruffling outwards in many uneven spongy layers from the edges of the paper, was to transform the appearance of the "manuscript" into a large, whiter, oyster mushroom whose spores were a writing.

One "chapter" of this "manuscript" was a short "video", filmed in brilliant sunlight. In the video I was a "younger" "woman" sailing a sleek wooden sailing boat which had in place of a fabric or canvas sail a glittering row of long translucent green kelp ribbons dangling from their onion-shaped bulbs. The sea was very blue. I departed from a curve of a shell or white pebble beach. The kelp coiled and fluttered in the brisk wind, and propelled the boat swiftly. This voyage was "mentored" or "aided" or "guided" from the shore by two "older" "women". Only one was visible, with curling platinum hair, maybe like Donatello Versace, but a little more butch or at least androgynous. The other one, invisible, was as adamant in her directions and opinions as the platinum blonde one. Towards these two I was neither resentful nor appreciative. I just accepted them. The general tone of the "dream", or the "voyage", or the "chapter", was light and swift and witty.

The day before in the garden at dusk I had seen a huge mushroom, in appearance a meaty mauvish cloudy ruffle, like an oyster mushroom, growing from the low scar of a severed branch of a large Berlin poplar, perhaps eighty years old, which had been hit by lightening in a summer storm some 5 months before. I wondered if I could eat it. I saw a glowing orange mushroom growing from leaf mould. It took the shape of a crooked sphere of knotted twine, hollow inside, like a web.

JAN 5: MB - LR

Mushrooms don't need light. Their spores are night writing. I remember collecting spores on a piece of aluminium foil once (mycologist phase, check diary, appendix of persons). They fell without urge, settling strangely into a reenactment of their symmetrical gills. I hoped that more mushrooms would grow from the spores, but they grew a strange white pus instead. I had maybe five or six jars of irregular pus. I could have used it as an invisible ink, like I used to do with milk (detective phase). I wrote with wet-white onto dry-white, then waited, and rubbed pencil shavings over it. Tiny pieces of colour would attach themselves, or absorb themselves, differently into the parts of the page that had a memory of clamminess. Some sea cucumbers produce a kind of mucus that they coat their attackers with. The mucus glows, and is semantically in the field of "burglar alarm". It writes a kletic invocation calling for the "police": any attacker that is bigger than the first, now re-named and dressed as prey.

I am writing a fantasy novel (six years has produced five pages, a set of characters or species, an architecture and a map). Writing again the first chapter this morning, in "Arquien", *ambience* was added to The Tower's list of censored words.

JAN 16: LR - MB

An owl
Dear Madi,

First I want to tell you what I know about owls, that is, from experience. About 8 years ago I moved into a country house whose chimney had not been used for a very long time, since the house had been abandoned to fall into ruin, then bought by my landlords to renovate for rental. So I was the first in many years—maybe even decades—to re-inaugurate the chimney, which had been occupied for all that time by an owl, or more likely a lineage of owls, an owl dynasty.(I do not know the lifespan of an owl.) The fireplace had been boarded up, and from time to time the summer I moved in, I heard a sort of dull clattering then a small *thunk*, as something ricocheted to the hearth through the chimney. When in autumn I took down the board to install a wood stove for my winter heat, I found a copious pile of tidy, round, dry brownish or soot-toned balls—they were what the owls had vomited up. They were regular in form, stuck together I'm not sure how, but visible on the surface of each walnut-sized sphere was a mash-up of fine fur and tiny bones. They were surprisingly light. It was a very beautiful thing to see this transformation of years of house and field rodents into an earthily minimalist installation work, and to think of the house as the ruinous constraint which framed this beautiful expression, a sort of mildewed anti-cube.

That winter, my first in that house, was extremely cold and long. The owl gone from my now smoky chimney, the rodents moved back in. They were large rodents—apples would go missing from my fruit bowl at night. They made a racket above the rafters. I told myself they were dormice, but in fact they were rats. I leaned this when after finally putting out poison—after trying spearmint oil on my table legs, pungent purple incense at night, and various other pacifist solutions— I found the corpse of the Mother Rat beneath my kitchen sideboard. She had begun to decay and the sweetish heavy odour was seeping into the room. I no longer shared my apples. I took her outside with a garden shovel, and flung her from the shovel as far as I could over the fence and into the frozen field behind the house. Afterwards I felt that I had poisoned the soul of the house, flung out its soul on a garden shovel.

That is what I know about the dark work of owls. I wish I understood how the pellets stuck together—maybe the owls made a special mucous for their art? And how does an owl swallow a rat? Does she only eat infants?

The other thing I've learned about mysterious biological fluid is this—Nicole Brossard, the Quebecois poet, coined a term for the sexual fluid of female arousal. Cyprine was her word. I imagine it as an alternate term for soul. I consider that Soul or Cyprine is what holds the world together, the world, this hacked-up bony hairy pellet. Cyprine, or syntax. Maybe Cyprine, or syntax is the fifth element. There are the four cosmic elements that we are familiar with—earth, fire, air and water— each with a corresponding fluid or humour in the human body, (blood, spittle, bile, and lymph) and then there is, in Plato's estimation, according to his cosmology, the *Timaeus*, a fifth element which he says is the necessary context for the cohesion of all the others. He calls it space, and its geometrical shape is the wild polyhedron we see in Dürer's etching *Melencolia*. But I think Plato is wrong. The glowing fifth element is Cyprine. What if Cyprine holds the universe together? What specifically is the oozing desire of Melancholy? What if Mother Rat was the soul of my house?

Six pages in five years seems to me a perfect pace for the making of a novel, since this way the inevitable and sparkling decay of all things will enter the composition unbidden. Just as in the body. There's no enlightenment in aging! Only an extreme and misshapen aesthetics of obscenely accelerated mutability and its humours, (you know Barnes' *Book of Repulsive Women*?) a sort of Baroque geriatrics.

JAN 19: MB - LR
Dear Lisa

Soon we are at something like a word count, but I do not want to stop receiving emails from you.

I am now installing for the exhibition, and trying my hardest not to sink into panic mode. It is an intense, distilled time -here is my favourite kind of thinking.

I have just discovered this thing called the book of hours, I wonder if you too heard of this "best seller", a popular devotional medieval manuscript which included certain prayers and psalms. Many readers decorated the margins of

their personal copy, their decorations often encroaching or perforating the sacred texts. The margins of an illuminated manuscript are themselves a space of dusk, or night. I have taken much pleasure in seeing some of these private images, diary-doodle spaces of self-writing, writing oneself against what is already written. Often the images are cheeky, profane, pornographic. They are referred to as babewyn: monkey business, shit stirring, an-tics, havoc wreaking... and it is from here that our term baboon is born. I decided to build a baboon that farts smoke. It seemed essential. I have created a beast.

Maybe shitting is a kind of marginal decoration. Looping back to looping, I wonder if reading on the toilet whilst shitting is a kind of loop, an ingestion, digestion, and egestion. I wonder where shit fits within the cosmology of fluids and humours.

To make the baboon, I moulded a cast in my own image. I had to use a mirror, and sort of squat for long enough for the plaster to dry. My legs and coccyx bone have since been sore, and I think I must have "missed", because the exercise has brought on an untimely bout of thrush. Thrush oozes, like badly farmed mushrooms, happening of its own accord.

I lived in Tamil Nadu for a year and met a girl who was fasting. She hadn't eaten for 25 days, only liquids. I remember being fascinated to learn that after so much time, of only drinking and using an enema, she had nonetheless shat out two or three rock hard spheres. This is how I imagined your rat-balls.

What is the syntax of a sentence that extricates/frees itself from itself. Maybe it has many "Oh's", or "o's", which is also how I would like to notate the song of the owl. With different font sizes, of course. But, then again, I have never, IRL, come close to an owl or its life.

JAN 23 (1 hour ago): LR- M

a note on turds

this is along the lines of a quick interjection, or a moody flourish— but it feels imperative to say that owl pellets are very light-weight— rather like holding a resting hummingbird in one's hand. In this way they are very dissimilar to the compacted turdlets of a fasting puritan.

I myself was once that puritan, so I ought to know.

They are coughed up, rather than shat out, I believe. Like a more baroque hairball.