



ALICE NOTLEY  
REITHA PATTISON  
CAMBRIDGE READING SERIES  
18 FEBRUARY 2011

## ALICE NOTLEY

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### Two Poems from *CULTURE OF ONE*

#### ELEMENTARY HUSK

Like harassing an iceberg with poppies. The ice has a pulp heart,  
enraged. He the chosen vision. Don't want him, Eve Love says.  
Everything has its boring attributes . . . Change them, shark with  
your mindless eyes. Oh I will,

Screaming out from cunt mouth, because you think you KNOW,  
until I grate the clock into my own philosopher screams --  
Stick my mascara into his eye whites, flutter  
insect lashes to excoriate the perceptual memos he'd say.  
Living on borrowed responses. Well it keeps you in power, old man.

I'm still entering the elementary school. Come in, Eve Love.  
If I can get past the fucking occluded teachers what I  
need to know is somewhere maybe embedded in the grey walls --  
rake em with my nails; scream and claw the swarming particles OUT

Where is something to KNOW?

They want you to go away; you won't learn what they say.

I want to know why my thighs are covered with scabs --  
You wounded yourself deliberately. How could this world  
LET ME, That's what I want TO KNOW! Emerald sobs.

## PORTION

This is my portion. Mercy -- Tara -- says. It's what's  
in my hands, always being given back. The celebration  
of me by my devotees is in fact a plea for ease -- heartsease --  
I'm murmuring again, rhyming like a fiend. Please,

they say, please. Sometimes pansy; sometimes wallflower;  
sometimes a cognitive disease, the doubleback blues. Blue Tara  
crosses the seas of your bad decisions to comfort you: But why  
should you have had to decide? The night is coarse,

my knees are hoarse from kneeling in front of an  
emaciated female. No, *I'm* Tara. Anorexic; don't  
have time to eat the haphazard peas they leave on the  
altar. You're just too grouchy. I called to her with

my orchestra of consonantal bees and desert vowels,  
accumulated unpaid fees to the whining fates;  
you owe us more sound! But I don't owe Tara a thing.

I have the keys to the house and the pickup, my mother said.  
Then she was driving the pickup backwards downhill, while  
calling on a cellphone to see if we had assurance. We don't; she's  
laughing. Don't worry! But I take over the wheel. I hate

these plays, verisimilitudinous, enacted near casinos, with men  
as top cheese -- they lose for us, admonish us, predict recuperation  
of small change from the leas licensed to clay effigies, you,  
me. Oh Tara! I only want to feel blissful for a second . . . !

I can't feel like that, she says, but maybe you can.

## ON ALICE NOTLEY

Waking up in *The Descent of Alette*, you fast submit to its *modus vivendi*, becoming a subway flâneur to wander its labyrinth of cars and caves.

*The Descent of Alette* is a 3041-line poem in four parts, published in a compendium of works by Alice Notley and Douglas Oliver called *The Scarlet Cabinet* (1992), and then published in a stand-alone volume (Penguin, 1996). The poem is written in quatrains (with singular forays into the quintain and the sestet) and ‘divided into feet’<sup>1</sup> by systematic quotation marks. These marks hover on the page like inky wings, promising to keep speech ‘saved in the air’<sup>2</sup> if not filled by air. Saved from death by rhythmic breath. ‘Rhythm is bound up with living’.<sup>3</sup> It helps preserve the ‘invisible’ essence of poetry from the killer freeze of print.

‘I love to write long poems’, Notley has said, ‘to be utterly involved in a particular poem as *a way of living a life*’.<sup>4</sup> The question of living and not living has been particularly important to the poet’s work. She gave two years to writing *The Descent of Alette*, and it became a part of her experience of living, another chamber in the mansion of memory. In *Mysteries of Small Houses* (1998), Notley revisits that chamber under the new compositional auspices of a ‘transpersonified state’.<sup>5</sup> In the poem ‘Alette’, she wanders again its ‘corridor stilled subway’:

“This hall, this hall is tyrants” “everything in me” “that stays frozen”  
“is the tyrant which” “I’ve made of it” [...]   
“I can’t relive Alette” “can only let it melt”<sup>6</sup>

This ‘Alette’ melts into *The Descent of Alette*, slipping from the quotation-free lines of *Mysteries* to the punctuation-packed lines of *The Descent*. Its language recalls a moment in Book II when Alette enters a cave of containers filled with voices. They ask for instructions and she responds: “‘I want you’ “to say,” “*Whatever*” “*is frozen*” “*will now melt*”” (p. 135). The Book complies, melting singular selfhoods into the community of Alette’s “I”.

*The Descent of Alette* shares its punctuation-scape with ‘White Phosphorus’, also to be found in *The Scarlet Cabinet*. The quotation marks of ‘White Phosphorus’ impede as well as facilitate the rhythms of breath. Like a typographical lump in the throat, they clog the visual space allotted to breath, producing a heady gasping. This rhythmic counter-tension (between motion and resistance) also usefully describes the working of word repetitions in this poem. Whilst programming the eyes and voice into a reading continuum (or even the trance-state of a cognitive loop), they also form an excess of word-matter to be stumbled through: “‘He was very’ “nearly back” [...] “very nearly home” “dying of dying of” “what”” (p. 409). The repetitions accumulate and transform as a subtle premonition of the metamorphosis that is to come: when the poet’s brother ‘Al’ is filtered through what he is not (“not an *albatross*”, guilty) to become a being changed, absolved, and strange: “‘Owl was Al’ [...] “My brother” “is Owl”” (p. 416, my italics).

The words filtered through this poem’s rhythmic living are charged with amorphous potential. Here the pun’s double life (Al/Owl) is enough to symbolically resuscitate the dead. The dead one melts (from the Old Norse *molten* ‘to digest’) into a new life; as Alette in Book III will be torn and eaten by the owl, only to emerge as an owl herself – a feathered soul (an *alma*) that will uproot and destroy the life of tyranny. Notley’s poetry grips and carries you across shadow-streaked landscapes on a wave of Ovidian force, restless and unsettling.

– Rosa van Hensbergen

1) Interview, *Signals* 5, 2009. 2) Introduction, *The Scarlet Cabinet*, p. 5. 3) *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6. 4) Interview with Brian Kim Stefans, *Jacket* 15, 2001, my italics. 5) Interview with CA Conrad, *Ten By Four*, 2007. 6) *Etruscan Reader* 7, 1997, p. 9.

XIV

No deluge: now the dove's mouth  
carries grass. The undersong of  
the "economic cosmos" is heard in  
the meadow where the herbicides  
work swift harm for a margin like  
inharmonic blue prairie fires. In  
this one, sous get stone again, miser  
bereft, the pain is phantasmal or  
in the pocket, coffered in the grove  
in locked land of external goodness  
for: "who dothe enuy at the treasury?"

## XV

Inevitably, there is an apple tree  
and a pomegranate: read falling  
and rising both; but the brambles'  
interjection of vanity, that incision  
cuts another way. Thorns truly  
prick a tragic boast of a carpel  
which is not one's own, a coronet  
of spite, and foment is its capitulation.  
Like Knights in panther skins, mineral  
Queens are lauded to pieces epically.

## ON REITHA PATTISON

Translation between the aleatory and overdetermined bonds the words on the page to a lightness soaking up the device faults. They are not after raw existence so much as the slip into transitory nodes, which feedback and perform their rhythms like vantages skimming across a databank of clustered desires. The movement from without and then further through and back within translation is the discovery of amplified historicity, of vectors both deeply intimate and ejected; by routing the potential overlaps, mismatches, frictive displacements, and subtle solutions, the acoustics of belief dissipate by heady imposition. The not-wrong is a song of inflammation and dastard co-signees. The words are existential modifiers, objects that dissuade us from the conditions of the assertoric all the while asserting their sponsorship of the spontaneous within the stochastic, without the diremption of artifice from intentional substance. Here, a counter- or target-text may guide the proliferation of consort devices from distant ages and imagined memories of the future, previous authors are mannequins in the grand anamnestic cooperative of agency. Stating a way for things to be so requires a case not entrenched by the felicity and zeal of heroic comedy, but the elliptical war-time fronts of the pejorocracy, aping the scabs of the monger, colluding oneself, the names all contranymns. Exceptions arise in untrustworthy sonority—as it foments and percolates in the protocol terminals, what is savored is so by its effulgence in the chemical stunts, and the transformation tactics start fresh and spry on the occasion of their thinking of themselves, the ‘Automat dreams of root leisure’.

— RD

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**ALICE NOTLEY** has published over thirty books of poetry, including (most recently) *Reason and Other Women*; *Grave of Light, New and Selected Poems 1970-2005*; and *In the Pines*. *Culture of One* and *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls* are forthcoming in 2011. With her sons, Anselm and Edmund Berrigan, Notley has recently edited both *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* and *The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*. Notley has received many prizes and awards including the Academy of American Poets' Lenore Marshall Prize, the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Award, the Griffin Prize, two NEA Grants, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Poetry. She lives and writes in Paris, France. As part of her CRS reading, Notley read James Schuyler.

**REITHA PATTISON** was born in Metroland, Outer London in 1977. She has studied Speech Sciences, and English Literature at various institutions, and has just finished her PhD on the work of the American writer, Edward Dorn. Her first book of poems, *Word is Born* - dual and duelling translations from the canzoni of Troubadour, Betran de Born, with Michael Kindellan - was published in 2006 by Arehouse Press. Her second book of poems, *Some Fables*, is just published by Grasp, and her third book is coming along ok. Other poems of hers have appeared in *Pilot* and *Axolotl*. As part of her CRS reading, Pattison read John Ogilby's *Fables*.

## CAMBRIDGE READING SERIES 11

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