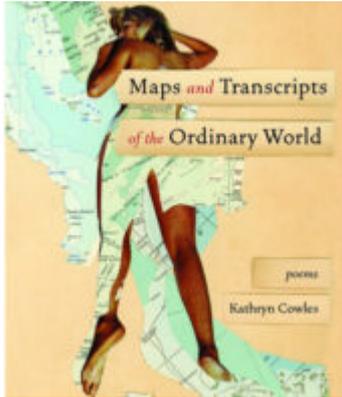


# Attention to the Real: A Conversation

written by Guest Contributor | September 3, 2020



*Maps and Transcripts of the Ordinary World* by Kathryn Cowles  
[Milkweed Editions](#), 2020  
88 pages / [Bookshop](#) / [Amazon](#)

**Kasey Jueds:** Hannah, I feel a little tentative about beginning, in part because I feel so strongly about this book. There's a sentence from Louise Glück's introduction to Katherine Larson's *Radial Symmetry* that's always stayed with me, in which Glück says our first, natural response to beauty is silence. I felt that strongly, reading *Maps and Transcripts*: the poems are so fully themselves, and the book so much a world, one I wanted to rest inside, and one there was nothing I could add to by adding more words. I wonder if you ever have similar feelings, embarking on a critical writing project?

And at the same time I'm excited to think through and be with this book together. One of the aspects of these poems that moves me deeply is the transparency of their desire to *be* the world, to include everything, to "get it down." I keep thinking of the final lines from "Three Hours in a Rocking Chair Outside the Blue-Roofed Bunkhouse in the Wind": "I am always looking. I have tried to write it down. The ordinary world. When I did, and when I didn't, it was always still there." There's this incredibly generous movement toward encompassing everything, and also toward respecting the impossibility of that (which also feels generous). The things of the world—clouds, oleander, goat cheese—don't need poems to describe them. And yet it feels like an act of love for poems, these poems, to try.

**Hannah VanderHart:** There is always a tension, for me, in writing about a work of art or book I love. On the one hand, there seems to be an ineffability and inarticulateness when you love something. You just want to say: YES, and sit with that yes, in its expression of pure affirmation. But I also feel that readers write best about things they read well, and that *loving* something frees you up to see its most precious aspects—to pay real attention.

And for me, the attention in *Maps and Transcripts* is the attention of a writer in the direct line of Elizabeth Bishop—like Bishop's *Geography III*, Kathryn Cowles' *Maps and Transcripts* suggests a mind that considers

topography, landmass, bodies of water, populations and cartography as a subject of *poetry*. There's a blending of the everyday and the abstract, of the perceived and the experienced and the academic, all in one book. Like Bishop, Cowles is interested in the angles and facets of our world. The poem *is* attention. As in the book's opening poem, "Origin Story," where the speaker "step[s] out of the blue paper / of map water / onto an island in Greece" and the world, the will, and the poem become a trinity (one and three) of acts:

and I wanted it down

in paper

sun rose and I wrote

sun rose

and then I wrote that I wrote it

And since you bring up generosity, Kasey, I want to mention the collaged form of *Maps and Transcripts*, from its author-designed cover collage of a woman sunbathing, overlaid with a blue map cut out, to the photographs and textual collages throughout the book. For example, the first collage in the book, "Map," has typed notes: "water boat water / water water water water boat," and "this is a bridge that get you to the water / there is the boat that gets / you to the bridge," and "this is the water here." It's a generosity of explicitness—in fact, explicitness is part of what Cowles' poems risk—a delineation of process. For me, this sheer naming uncovers the mysteriousness of everyday nouns.

Is risk even the right word?

**KJ:** Hannah, yes to all this. Your words about how loving something frees us to pay deep and true attention to it: I've been carrying this idea with me, and it's bringing me joy. Perhaps loving a book helps us to see it clearly, to be the best readers and companions for it we can be. Perhaps it's not "objectivity" or distance that enables us to be what another poet-friend semi-jokingly calls "proper critics," but love.

I am completely taken with your notion of a "generosity of explicitness." I agree that Cowles' poems risk explicitness, delineation of process, transparency of desire to be "always looking," to "want it down." To be so forthright, so open, is to be vulnerable, on the page as well as in person. And these poems might argue that there isn't much distance between the two, since the work often seems concerned with questioning the distinctions between the written and the lived, the poem and the world. So many of the poems seem to ask, what is a poem, really? And/or, equally fervently, what is a map, a recipe, a transcript, a field guide, a hymn? Where do these forms we think we know overlap with or blur into the lived life that gives rise to them? In those magical lines you quote from "Origin Story," life and desire for the poem and the poem itself aren't the same thing, yet they are not

separate, either. Thinking of them as a trinity feels quite perfect to me.

Cowles' titles strike me as another example of this generosity of explicitness, this transparency. Skimming the table of contents reveals multiple poems and collages entitled "Map," "Recipe," "Hymn," and "Directions," as well as titles including "transcript," "postcard," "photograph," and "poem" itself. It's as if each poem desires to declare itself with perfect clarity. And yet the poems want to dig beneath the surface, too, to wonder and question and burrow into the unexpected, to peer beneath the form and then hold up for us what can be found there. For example, here's the second and final stanza of "Recipe [Goat Cheese]":

-2 cloves garlic, hand-cut—use a paring knife

what you want are tiny squares

-handful kalamata olives—a big handful, pitted,

squares again

-an amount of goat cheese

Use a big bowl mix it w/your bare hands

shape into a ball

The garlic is strong

give it some bread baked w/olive oil

to hold onto we all need something

There are aspects of traditional recipes here, obviously: ingredients, directions. And then there's the perfect and unexpected swerve, in the final line—no line break or punctuation to hold it apart from what's come before—to "we all need something." Here, the poem seems to be saying, you can make this too, and it will nourish you. And, also: here are words to soothe a different kind of hunger. Here is an understanding of what it's like to be human. Two different types of generosity, two forms of offering, two ways of being useful; perhaps all equally sustaining.

**HV:** Kasey, your reading of "Recipe [Goat Cheese]" and Cowles' "unexpected swerve" (which makes me think of the history of the sonnet/poetic "turn") raises for me the idea of language games in the philosophical, Wittgensteinian sense. Here, the poet is participating in more than one kind of language game—you could also call it forms, or "forms of life." In *Maps and Transcripts*, the poet opens her door to the possibility of *any* language game being also a poem. This seems to me to be a creative and conceptual difference from a perspective that reads a poem as being one kind of thing—stanza, rhyme, meter, or even as one kind of experience, such as description-that-culminates-in-revelation. And since I've already said the

name Wittgenstein (a poet's philosopher, if ever there was one!), it seems worth noting how important the form of the prose paragraph is to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—a small, poem-sized form—and that Cowles' *Maps and Transcripts* is a collaborative, mixed-media text of poetic investigations. On one page, "Ohio" ("This day has quietness / that sticks. The writing / makes a noise like sheets, / then a quietness."), on the corresponding page, "Shower Water" ("stood in the shower today / let water drip off my lids / it wasn't crying / it was shower water").

I love to think about books as asking their readers questions. The thinking and the creativity are not over because you hold a completed book in your hands—but rather, the art goes on and continues to do good (or harm). Poems like "Ohio" and "Shower Water" make me wonder what in my life is an unacknowledged poem, here and today? This morning, feeding my children oatmeal and too-ripe strawberries, standing in the kitchen, towel on my shoulder, reading and transported by a Kazim Ali poem in *American Poetry Review* to Berlin, and beyond. Simone Weil says that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer." Prayers and poems, and their speakers and readers, have this in common.

**KJ:** Hannah, it's funny, or serendipitous, or both: I've been thinking of that same Weil quote, in relation to these poems. As we've been saying in various ways, they are rooted in a profound care for, and loving documentation of, the "ordinary world" of the title, a place both holy and daily. Which is part of the reason I love so much your bringing in Weil's definition of prayer: I also find these poems prayer-like, in their concentrated seeing and their refusal of divisions between the spiritual and the everyday.

You've convinced me I need to read Wittgenstein! What you write about Cowles' capacious perspective on what a poem can be strikes me as both true and inspiring, and reminds me of Rachel Zucker's definition of poems as places without rules, places of freedom. Maybe we can add "freedom" along with "generosity" to our list of adjectives describing Cowles' work, though it's interesting to me that the poems in *Maps and Transcripts* tend to discover their freedom via the constraints of received forms. Perhaps many poems do this, but the forms here are so unusual—or rather, they're unusual as the raw material of poems, yet they're also quotidian, daily. The poems make their nests within recipes and postcards and directions at the same time as they take flight from these forms.

I felt a visceral, warmly joyful response to your whole paragraph about books asking their readers questions, and now I'm wondering the same: where are the unacknowledged poems in my own life? Even after many years of believing that our entire lives can and do feed our poems, I think I'm still making unhelpful internal distinctions between what "should" and "shouldn't" be part of my own work. This book, and your reading, are helping to nudge me towards more inclusiveness, more freedom.

Back to poems-as-prayers for a moment: I feel myself wanting to talk with you about "Photograph of a Friend Taken After He Has Disappeared," one of the *Maps and Transcripts* poems I return to most often. Here is the whole of it:

I take a photograph.

A telephone wire, a pole.

Nothing to see.

I write: I can picture you here.

I write: Walk out of the woods, Craig.

I write: Those woods, there. And now.

I write: Walk out of the woods I have taken  
a photograph with an empty spot the empty spot is yours.

I write: Take it.

I write: I can almost picture you.

A set of directions yearning toward the impossible. If Cowles' poems embody prayer as attention, "Photograph of a Friend" seems also to offer up a different type of prayer: a longing for reunion, communion. Set against the poem-collages in which words describe what *is* there (as, for example, "this is a bridge that gets you to the water . . . this is the water here" from "Map," the collage you referenced earlier), this poem's focus on "the empty spot," its powerful desire to transform loss, makes my heart ache.

**HV:** Ah, yes. There is something about the objectiveness of the repeating description "I write:"—an attempt to assert distance in the presence of grief (often an intimate, internal experience) that is so compelling. It reminds me of one of my favorite lines from Basho's "Learn from the Pine": "The bones of *haikai* are plainness and oddness." Even the formality of the poem's structure and the "I write:" is plain and odd—or, another way to gloss these words might be to say: ordinary, familiar, humble—and yet previously unlooked-at, and so unusual. "Photograph of a Friend" is confession without a priest, and performs what writers do best: articulates longing, writes the unspoken into speech. It is a mapping process, a heart and memory cartography. Cowles' attention to image and visual media (a photograph, here) throughout *Maps and Transcripts* has the quality of a pilgrim before a relic. Some relics are objects with an intrinsic sacredness within a faith tradition, but some objects we make holy because of our attention. Both kinds of relics have the ability to transform our attention, and that seems to me what *Maps and Transcripts* offers its reader—an imaginative transformation, an attention to the real.

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**Kasey Jueds'** first book of poems, *Keeper*, won the 2012 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press. Her written work can be found in journals including *American Poetry Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Narrative*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Ninth Letter*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Colorado Review*, and *Pleiades*. She lives in Philadelphia with one human, a spotted dog, and many houseplants.



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