

“The gauche-ness of actual being”: A Conversation With Jennifer MacKenzie

written by Joe Milazzo | April 2, 2015



Whither the lyric? A hand-wringing (see below) form perhaps by definition—itsself a manifestation of doom—a certain amount of common sense attends to hand-wringing over the lyric, its utilities as well as its ethics. Can selves, being inscribed, also be written out? If so, is this an article constitutional? To be taken on faith? I recently sat with some other poets, playing a kind of joke Russian roulette with the shifty discourses of our craft, and found ourselves pointing at our own temples with the word “interrogation.” I don’t recall that word appearing anywhere within the poems collected in Jennifer MacKenzie’s stunning, news-that-stays-news [My Not-My Soldier \(Fence, 2014\)](#), but “interrogation” is a fine example of how our (that is, literary) gestures towards a solid, reputable, clinical objectivity can reproduce hurt and grief with more ubiquity than even the most sentimental of euphemisms. That is, in the era of Abu Ghraib, the persistent low-grade fever of government surveillance, and who knows what other atrocities still lurk in recent history’s darkest corners, interrogation is not to be conflated with activities exclusively cerebral. And yet we speak of poems that, in the paraphrase of our hopes and expectations, wield the power of interrogation, and we often address our reading selves as occupying the position of interrogator. How much connotation, and how many violations, do we ignore in participating in such usage? Is connotation its utterer’s (or mouthpiece’s) to master? Most importantly, how can we productively estrange ourselves from “problematic” language without condemning or utterly vacating those communities in which it is current? How might we differ together, if not universally?

The simple answer is with great care, but, of course, care is rarely without complications, and never effortless. With respect to the care it tenders its subjects—Syria, “current events,” love (even to a Badiouian extent), deracination, much more—and frequently at great risk to its own lyrical equilibrium, Jennifer MacKenzie’s *My Not-My Soldier* is a book best described as literally painstaking. And some of the most burdensome pain we must take up, as MacKenzie does in her poems, is our own. Especially that pain we inflict on others in our attempts to manage the poverties and miseries—and thus the qualia, as centerless and unspeakable as existence itself—of our personhood. Perhaps it is true, as Emily Dickinson proposes, that “After great pain, a formal feeling comes”. That “As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –”. I myself cannot make a rhyme from or around these notions, but I am grateful beyond reason to have had my nerves unceremoniously examined by *My Not-My Soldier*’s prosodic intelligence: a poetics somehow simultaneously wary, unflinching, and so open to ravishment it delivers itself from its worries.



“Discussion is a cold act; it implies safety and remove from the dangers of violence, oppression, and censorship. There is no room for discussion in *My Not-My Soldier*, Jennifer MacKenzie’s brilliant and disturbing document of the failures of language and certainty in the face of atrocity... In an age when people can watch war on television like it’s a form of entertainment, how do we convey the true heartbreak of violence? Can truth form a sentence of itself? Do words like government, state, security mean anything beyond their empty gestures of protection and assurance? These are deeper questions than can be solved through a discourse made of ideologies, and MacKenzie allows those questions to resonate through and by the fractured lens of a daily life punctuated by horrors too unparaphraseable to simply be described.” (D. A. Powell)

“Is poetry ‘a way to stave off history’? Jennifer MacKenzie asks this in Damascus, deeply aware that ‘they are not gonna bomb you there in Oregon.’ Reading this marvelous book I kept thinking of Zukovsky’s ‘upper limit music/lower limit speech’—these poems are first rate speech and music at the same time.” (Maged Zaher)

“Mackenzie’s poetry navigates loss; the distance between relationships and whole countries... To read this book is to ‘be[come] smaller than a comma/tenacious, some new unnamed virus.’” (Kiki Petrosino)

1) As much as this distinction may be an aid to parsing, would you classify these poems as being more in the tradition of “war poetry” or a “poetry of witness”?

Well, I think they’re more in the tradition of Orientalism, in that I wrote them as an American, a westerner, and as such in Syria was far safer than a Syrian. The worst thing that the Syrian government would do to me if they didn’t like my writing would be to deport me, whereas dissident Syrians are vulnerable to arrest, torture, and/or a bullet in the head. (Now from the regime and ISIS.) So I was extremely privileged, as in relatively well-off, safe, and able to leave whenever. Yes, to the degree that I wanted to say in poems, this is happening, people are being killed, I guess I was trying to be a witness. But I’m wary of ennobling rubrics for poems because I know how self-centered I am. So many of them were written on planes over the Atlantic, trying to balance an inchoate sense of being literally, physically suspended over and between one people’s traumatized desire for dignity and another’s comfortable ability to ignore it. So they come out of questions, like how do I mediate between these disparate places?

2) What voice does etymology—the genealogy of words—have in the orchestration of these poems? [I’m particularly intrigued here by a “theme” that I hear sounding out in “Indiscrete Leviathan,” “The Dead Girl,” and “Dispatch,” of an integral “foreignness” fundamental to yet subsumed within the English

Language, the “English of vendetta / & farms” (“Black Mercedes Novel”).]

As I wrote them, I was making most of my living teaching ESL to rich kids who wanted it as either a ticket across the Atlantic or a bauble of upper-class cool. So my bread and butter was the prestige of this like-it-or-not lingua franca, and I started feeling pickled in that portion of my own inheritance, because I was basically parroting it for money. But in their separate objectified materiality, words were—and have always been for me—also like a second body, a safer mode of physicality than my own body. So the role of etymology is partly to voice or embody the genealogy of human relations, of power relations, the performance of passive and active, transitive and intransitive, orders, especially new forms of relation embodied by words that don't exist in English. In “Derivation of the word Sultan”, I was thinking about the Arabic word “sulta”, which means power as in the authority to cause things to happen, and which doesn't have an equivalent in English. The feeling is something like in Dante's version of hell when people keep referring to the power of God's orders through the refrain, “this has been willed where what is willed must be.” That's the power of language to instantiate by naming—or, as James Baldwin says, “the structure of power which has the right and the duty to tell other people who they are for very dubious reasons.” That's the orchestration I was trying to catch etymology in the act of.

3) If I may extend the metaphor above, as I do feel the entire book is wrought with a strangely seductive music... several of these poems feel as if they are working less toward (or around) crescendo and its attendant emotions and more with the notional and tonal possibilities of diminuendo. E.g., “Art thou. Yeah, well.” (“Pharaoh Glimmer”); “My heart is really beating but it is meaningless to say so. Thanks. (“The Dead Girl”); “... People are happy / to own smaller & smaller objects that play music / & choosing the music they want to play / You can put a picture on it // & change the picture. Over & over / it is very easy & so they do / & are...” (“Odysseus Wept”). What dynamics were of concern to you in the composition of these poems—and, by extension, the arrangement of this book?

I do like diminuendo, as you put it, or deadpan, as I feel it, as a way to deflate or counter my own tendency toward baroque performance of, you know, linguistically ravishing the urn of Anglo-Saxon truth-beauty. While I was writing the poems I was missing what I think of as American understatement, the straight-faced “yeah” that depends for resonance on a shared withholding. So that tug-of-war between those different registers was a main dynamic. The music is unbidden, and I think just part of having a sense of hearing; the choice is whether or not to filter it out, and why. Arrangement of the book is a whole other thing that I found basically impossible, until Rebecca Wolff told me to make a list of labels and organize the poems accordingly. Thank you, Rebecca.

4) [Michael Hessel-Mial has recently argued](#) that, contrary to certain patterns of contemporary usage, aesthetic displacement is not fungible with the actual displacement as it is experienced by victims of social, economic and political trauma. Based on what you know about your own poetry, do you feel displacement is an appropriate descriptor for the personal upheavals the

lyric subjectivit(y)(ies) in *My Not-My Soldier* reports upon? Of the synonyms and near-synonyms for “displacement” available to you, which might offer a range of connotations more useful to an appreciation of *My Not-My Soldier*?

Yes, of course, “aesthetic displacement is not fungible with actual displacement”—the former brings the hope of awards, the latter is homelessness. Emeritus-ness versus statelessness. Does the rest of the question mean, “do the poems elide the actual displacement of victims of armed conflict by articulating in its stead “the speaker’s” subjective experiences of sex, love, domesticity, etc?” If so, partially yes, while also trying to locate those experiences explicitly in the context of literal violence, and by doing so, interrogate the lyric’s subjective documentary balancing act. I mean, I grew up loving the great (white) lyric, and then, in wanting to write poems inside a nascent war, had to ask myself, what good is that sing-song when people you love are being exiled and killed? Maybe not much. The question about near-synonyms seems like a tricky vocab question tiptoeing around something else. If that something is Kenneth Goldsmith for example annexing Michael Brown’s murder for applaudable material, the dubious alchemy of turning someone else’s violation and grief into my great poem, I would say, it depends on your definition of appreciation, and whether the point of poetry is that it be appreciated. I can’t speak for other readers, but in terms of writing these poems, this sticks with me: in the last place I lived in Damascus with my now-husband, who is Syrian, on the first night that the army started using the hilltop above our house as a position from which to bomb the southeastern suburbs, he came into our bedroom and found me writing in bed, and half-yelled, “Is it beautiful? Is it beautiful?” I took him to mean, I am hurt by the fact that I think you are using this occasion of destruction which grieves me to make a poem, and from the position of an outsider; are you enjoying this painful war as a spectacle?” So I try to hold the question close while writing, keep breathing, call myself on my own bullshit, and listen when other people make that call for me. As in “Confessional Poem”, “I mean, what we have described, have we extorted?”—to which I would add now, “exploited”.

5) 5) Would you describe the references to Hobbes, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Om Kalthoum, Camus’ *The Stranger*, Walter Benjamin, John Donne, the propagandistic images associated with Italian fascism’s reinterpretation of Rome’s imperial prowess, etc. scattered throughout these poems allusions? Or are they, like the video-ed, televised, Western-eyed images of “violence in *The Middle East*” glimpsed elsewhere in these poems, more akin to mediations?

I think they are allusions, or references to my own cultural map, in the context of, ok, here’s a landmark I know, does it help me locate myself here? Again, the poems are Orientalist, as in, inevitably “Western-eyed”. Especially since I grew up believing that high (western) culture contained the keys to the kingdom, those references are me taking notes on my own interior furniture, the culture I came with, to bring it into the poem’s feedback loop, and see what happens.

6) “Lust” is a word that recurs with some frequency in the poems that fill the first half or so of *My Not-My Soldier*, and often in the book it feels as

if an erotic, if not eroticized, yearning exercises a magnetic pull on both language and form, “body and soul. What sort of consummation, if any, is possible in these poems where, to quote from “On Hue,” “every space has a gender”?

The differences between earlier and later sections of the book is that the former come out of unskilled anger at various forms of aggression, which gets gendered via the metaphor of rape, and the desire to somehow replicate it in language. That gets gradually tempered by an increased clarity about and towards political structures, and love. So, in terms of consummation, the poems move through frustrated rage, where consummation would be something like the translation of a scream, into the actualization of, among other things, love and humor. The laughter that comes in towards the end of the book is another kind of consummation altogether, a much more generous one.

7) Midway through *My Not-My Soldier*, on narrative in particular begins to assert itself. The speaker in “Notebook Interrupted by a Trip to the Hospital,” “The Dead Girl” and several other poems references a wound, presumably one inflicted by a gunshot. What does this wound admit? Is healing necessary within the pages of this book?

That wound is not a gunshot; it’s an incision from emergency surgery. Suddenly almost dying—and being saved by competent medical staff—made me immensely grateful for human competence and more alert to how others were denied access to this care. In the context of Syria, where injured protestors taken to government hospitals were often tortured to death, and their corpses returned with new wounds (as mentioned in “Blurbing the Reconquista”), it made me feel this tremendous disjunction between my still being alive while others died from choking on their own blood, or being bludgeoned to death, and so on. So I guess the wound admits vulnerability, mortality, and awareness of asymmetrical violence. And healing it entails some mediation of the spectrum of vulnerability, and my own ambivalence about the implications of my poems’ attempted empathy towards and identification with it. More than necessary, I would call it a gift.

8) In “Postcard to the Angel Jibreel,” the poem’s speaker observes that “as people favor visuals / reasons peter out.” In “Blurbing the Reconquista,” we read “you means other / people I don’t really see.” And, in “Isabella in the Tower of Winds,” the speaker wonders “What if I had a glass clitoris?” How would you describe *My Not-My Soldier*’s attitude towards the relationship between sensation, perception and “understanding”?

For much of my life, I enforced a quiet separation between my body and my mind; my mind was a safe place to be, my body not so much. Poetry was the place where I slowly tried to join the two, to inch toward words that I felt had some kind of integrity. So I suppose the book posits a relationship wherein sensation is the foundation of perception, which is the basis of understanding, articulation and also possible solidarity. And, also, the intuition that just as you have to be in solidarity with yourself—you have to be real on some level with yourself—before you can really find solidarity with other people, so too with poems. Formally, as they’re being composed: that is, in practice, you really can’t write someone else’s poem. Though

people often try—I have, anyway.

9) The very first poem in this collection, “Silver Car,” commences what I will call a confession: “Because I too would like to write / someone else’s poem”. In “Notebook Interrupted by a Trip to the Hospital,” the lyric subjectivity reveals “I’m pretending I’m Hemingway.” And, later, in “The Dead Girl”: “I will mention the dead girl and thus be noble.” How much are these poems a reckoning with their own “privilege” (a word no less loaded and triggering as displacement)?

I wish they had reckoned more with their privilege. What I was reckoning with was my increasing sense of the smallness and insignificance and irrelevance of poetry, or most of the poetry I knew, in the face of, for instance, massacre. Though there is a subset of American poetry that says, basically, I will mention the dead X and thus be noble. The performance of hand-wringing. That’s what I suspected myself of doing, and wanted not to do. The thing I found really astonishing about twentieth century Arabic poetry is how poets were really liable to the systems of power they lived in: so many of the greats, like Nizar Qabbani, Mahmoud Darwish, Muzzafer al-Nawwab, Muhammad al-Maghout, really spoke truth to power and paid in greater or lesser ways for that speech. And people recognized that they were putting their money where their mouth was, so to speak, and that integrity earned them popular affection. I thought, why doesn’t this exist in America, at least in the fairly canonical traditions I studied in school? Who here now is arrested for the politics in their poems except, sometimes, hip-hop artists? Certainly not me. (Second thoughts: I know we have the first amendment, state institutions, and many other advantages over dictatorial regimes that make poets’ fates happier here. But I also wonder what it means that so much of contemporary poetry seems to be talking mostly to itself, about itself. Is that privilege? I think the full answer to this question is actually at *minimum* an hours-long debate.)



10) In “Small White Bed,” certain lines have been crossed out. I read these not as instances of redaction (or censorship, as mentioned by D.A. Powell in his comments on the book) but of radical re-inflection: a mannered saying, one which proposes an immediate unsaying while simultaneously pointing to the impotence of such an impulse. What other lines in *My Not-My Soldier* might be persuaded to say to (and of) themselves, as “Small White Bed” also says: “No you shut up”?

I was paying attention, in those crossings-out, to my own desire to censor, my own cowardice and/or restlessness as a note-taker, my aversion to risking myself, and my tendency to deflect attention—my own and others’. “Love” gets replaced by “leave”—a safer word and action. In that sense, the nakedest lines might be persuaded to cross themselves out, to shut up. The ones that embody sentiment, need, pain. The ones that betray the gauche-ness of actual being.

11) Of the many forces and phenomena to which these poems could be said to raise a kind of opposition or resistance, which phenomenon or force would you

single out as the most compelling?

Aversion.

[Jennifer MacKenzie](#) grew up in Bloomfield Hills, MI, and was educated at Wesleyan University's College of Letters and the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Verse*, *Quarterly West*, *Lungfull!*, and *Shampoo*. Until October 2012, she edited the Damascus-based monthly magazine *Syria Today*, and her articles and literary non-fiction on Syria, Turkey and other countries in the Near East have appeared in *The Huffington Post*, *Guernica*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, and *Killing the Buddha*. She now lives in the Bronx where she teaches literature, composition and journalism at Lehman College.