

Alterity & Emergence: A Feminist Folio

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Alterity & Emergence: A Feminist Folio

Alterity disrupts the status quo, renders the familiar strange, and insists on being in and of itself seen. And in disrupting, rendering, and insisting, reveals the potential to be and to do otherwise.

This folio of feminist work begins with Claire Marie Stancek's poems, selected from a manuscript titled *of care as of this encounter*. In form and content Stancek sharply contrasts a mother's care with obstetric care in America and its attendant violences. Common to all, birth—coming into being absolutely dependent on other humans for nurturance—is an experience necessarily shared. Shaped by the same forces that structure society, the experience is also profoundly unequal. In Lara Crystal-Ornelas's translations selected from *Atlantica and the Rustic*, Mexican poet María Baranda explores the natural world's continuous processes, rendering the role of scientific information sensual by channeling it through a figure named "My Friend." From the larger work *Flowers in Bloom an UnBordered Encyclopedia*, poupeh missaghi's essay, "پامچال / Pamtchal / Primrose," meditates on language, translation, and narrative via family stories and lost histories. For "*What a Performance | Extracts*," Sara Crangle selects and introduces seven sections of a roman à clef by the avant-garde author, artist, and activist, Anna Mendelssohn. Left unpublished at her death in 2009, the 500-page manuscript, in Mendelssohn's words, is "a story/ film/ play/ poem/ musical/ comedy about someone who didn't want to be the person described." From a larger project *Good Morning Trilogy*, Carla Harryman's selections from "Scales for the Living" moves through canyons and seas developing the liminal space of dream and also of dialogue and collaboration. In this work *the between* steps forth, both visceral and real. A performance of "Bearings" with musician and composer Jon Raskin accompanies the work here.

My gratitude to *Tupelo Quarterly* for inviting me to gather work for this folio—it is an entire delight. To Claire Marie Stancek, María Baranda, poupeh missaghi, Anna Mendelssohn, and Carla Harryman for the past, present, and future of your work, thank you. To Sara Crangle and Lara Crystal-Ornelas, who have created access to these works, deep gratitude. To you—thank you for reading.

—Karla Kelsey

Claire Marie Stancek
from *of care as of this encounter*

sign in

state your name and date of birth your state

of distress and some anxiety your

rate your pain make it terse make it
verse state reverse to the nurse quick call the
FAQ game and rate disburse

quick links easypay

say today name your name

at the tone your response experiencing
unusually high volume valued on a scale of one two buckle

up hang up if this is an emergency

call 911 and

our hours your name in the rain a bird

in wire mesh dead all winter caught

above the hospital entrance

fast falls

the eventide when other helpers fail

out cry O soul

with me to see a fine doctor

upon a wide tide whose moon

tether dim on her fingers

bells on arms alarm

the hour and ours grow feathers

goose weather ride a night music wherever

you know the risks please

sign the section from

fingers O thou pass O say

little life who like thyself

abide with me who never

could not call out wait

you who / held or dreamed it

are you going to rate your pain
 to one who lives remember
me a trail of
 moon crumbs goodnight
room whom I would *readdress*
 the patient despite light and the red
thread through *our recommendations*
 she is not wherever you're going
 I'm going on a river of
way away *patient is clearly*
a scale of blue two buckle
it threw a light
 night and dew do do
are you going too

FAQ what / beholden you dreamed it in

O hospital hospital sing me a pretty little
ditty little city in all of all *not medically necessary we*

have carefully reviewed your crooked sixpence
against a crooked style *your claim*

was in the counting house eating cake and money

FAQ how do I dress the how we do if I don't
agree with the song a sign in writing or in rhyme

to Grievances and Appeals what other rights do
you have the right

and we encourage you *for this reason the request you can*
learn more just call the doll the pie is opened and

the birds began to *give us written comments*

we based our decision

it might help to talk it over with your doctor

no

no

parsley sage
thyme the bare

gooseberry
bare tell her true

rhyme don't you
or cry for

love
she was once

going to make

me tell her to cut

a cambric
your legs can you

can you feel
going are you

declaring yourself

to your scar

while nurses sing
doctor there's a hole

O fair
dear doctor

tell her to cut

with scissors of silver

can you feel them now

seven layers of flesh

make them make me

my melodies my

maladies while nurses

sing and babies cry

goodnight

light

face of

turning away when

nothing more

than a passing

by the face

there's a hole

in the operating

doctors gossiping

somebody invited

a something river wider

stilled drifter

or a moon

then hole hold and

river in

O there

where I balanced o'er

nothing more

than fading letting

down into

in and in

unself

until a voice

we're out of

the woods how

easy so close

or could be

wherever you're going

there's a hole

spider

inside

morning two

wrist bands

guards waved

on a cold and frosty

baby I carried

an insulated bag

it said I am

a pumping

heart a

parent who swallowed

inside her

you know your mother she

knows you she

woke all the other babies

last night you know

and where was I

were you

cry don't you

supply your try

little babies don't

yield

your I

am a pumping

parent who was born

to yield to

be milked

don't you

die hush hush

little heart I am

as threaded through as you

mouth mask

a hundred other mothers in the beginning

held you and sang sang the same songs

some gently some with swift ringing and flashing
fingers bells on her toes pixelated peaks the lines to

and from your heart shampoo you smelled like goodnight
songs we have sung who washed you first

for a hundred mothers everyone

wore gloves masks everyone said of my empty bulk husk

any day now? but secretly I bared

my whole damp face for you to feel

a mother's lips your eyes spun open dilated whose floating eyes

over the white masks whom could I tell
who would believe she is mine mine

and she shall have music wherever she goes

lamb land

little lamb	here I am
violets are blue	and good luck
on a Wednesday	lasts all the day
shake shake shake	a kiss for you
sneeze for a letter	or for danger make
a wish for the roses	are blue too
little boy blew	your horn the cow
ran away and who	said the song
should or even could	be new who said
moon's in the meadow	and hear iamb
sneezing on a Monday	gotta clap clap clap
with the sound	on repeat after me after you
pick it up	if you're happy
and you know it	clap your hands

María Baranda
from *Atlántica and the Rustic*
Translated from Spanish by Lara Crystal-Ornelas

When María Baranda wrote *Atlántica y el Rústico* in the early 2000s, her words were inspired by an artist friend who would recount his long walks in the forest where he collected objects for his art. She'd follow these conversations by reading about the botany, minerals, and natural processes that she had heard about. *Atlántica y el Rústico* is poignant and otherworldly, often corporeal. María's neologisms are words that her poems called her for, inventions to approach the desired object through a more scientific, agricultural lens.

Baranda's poems are complex and beautiful, and my experience in translating them was much the same. As the daughter of a Mexican immigrant mother who deeply supported this collaboration, the translation of this work was a collective act of love and connection to our mother tongue.

This translation was nurtured by my late mentors C.D. Wright and Michael S. Harper who help me remember to be brave each day.

—Lara Crystal-Ornelas

María Baranda
From *Atlantica and the Rustic*
The natural history of the rustic: Selections

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ANY ROUTE IS AN ARTIFICE. He hesitates and deliberates, loses the trace in his destiny. What he doesn't save, disperses, absorbed by roots like an offered sum by the god of dawn. The siege is lingering.

My Friend loves music. He dances in the larvary while the leeches burst with blood between his fingers.

Deciduous. Time shatters, like ovaries, on the cliffs.

Limp sharks fall into the trap of defeat. Lamias. A noose. He doesn't despair. The birds, he says, always nest between the lips of morning. Liquid ambers.

Graze the Cosmos, he thinks, and traces two lines of blue between radulae and mandibles. The edge by the angle is part of his faith in kaleidoscopes.

My Friend gets close to what he observes. Above, the sky is a door of lacquer and sandstone, small architecture, hollow where seagulls laugh.

Outside, the cry of barbarians is heard. They build roads by joining branches and dry matrices. Wheelbarrows of salt serve to brick up the nuptial milk of their abortions.

"If I could see their effervescence under the moss." He lies down.

My Friend presses his lips to the edge. Dreams of a garden of firethorns with monkeys crossing it in canoes.

Wolves and lizards visit its dance floor. There is a plot fenced by ringdoves and pigeons in the heat of morning. He says: life is simple enough if you hold wonder in jars. Seeds of rosemary and marjoram, cinnamon—at times—and a little bit of wormwood to taste death. Beside the torrent he registers the thirst of a scorpion. He wants to make an exhibition in vitrines. Show its skin, teeth. Pincers.

Clear is custom. To see Distance on the ear of one who bleeds. Mastery is comprehending the revenge of the rose on the eye. Luminaries.

He paints on the border of an obelisk. The shadow collects itself, absorbs itself. Nectareans. Vermillion tumors to mark death. But which flower absolves the flower of itself? Afflictions. He chisels the fall of a trembling sun in sulfuric systoles. He changes his name.

I DECIDE TO HELP HIM.

I begin by cleaning the cleft. I wash the zygote.

Know that his pride is in silencing the lamp. A small bird fastens itself to the freshness of distance. It is oppression. Fear that was always between us.

His blood lines disturb me. I do not try.

Nevertheless, I penetrate to the interior through saliva.

I would have preferred to escort a child. His multiple qualities.

I think of white lilies at the height of lightning. My Friend has taught me.

Now I find pleasure in the drive of the defeated.

Places. Formless harmony in a remote forest.

I have learned to keep quiet, to lick the feast of an anonymous manuscript.

The point is the feeling. Rhythm is to discover earth in the desecration of its admirers. Luck relying on the measure of absurd things.

My Friend says: sea is fire, a tone that radiates our souls.

I have learned to keep quiet, and still I continue.

LIKE A VIRUS THAT KEEPS VIGIL OVER HIS FACE, like a ring of oxide in the flavor of his march, more naked, more alone than the single fragrance of his sea of infancy, from century to century passing in the incubation of liquid clays, entirely alone upon seeing a little of the tumultuous life.

Tiniest larva in terror.

Never at the edge, forever on the branch, never a bud,
not in the course of matter, not in the light of his first dusk or
of his final eye, scaled star in flight, Nibelung.

His eye, trembling in the illuminated ochre, his bell in the glass, his spark
in the air of dread.

Every minute inflicted, every minute lost. His whole being, unfamiliar,
uninhabited in the beards of defamation.

Tiniest calcareous larva, self-contradicts, declares itself steered, crazed.

More alone, very alone, entirely alone he submits to the title of a segregation,
in the successively, in the abandoned, in what sleeps and awakens, in what
demands on the verge and deposits and reclaims, the first and foremost biconvex voice,
in the vibrating iris, in the onyx of the womb, in love.

Simplifies, codifies, minimizes, listens, him, between the celestial silt, says,
he folds himself in the vaults of the branch, arborizes and extends in his writing, solar
bread, radiant bird, bird horse, oval window, digit, spark, the most minimal
waves, in what simplifies, in what codifies and listens, him,
magnanimous larva, malformed, umbilical.

More alone, very alone, entirely alone, tiniest fusiform larva, acid that
soaks, unique and coarse sap.

Never at the edge, forever on the branch, never a bud,
not in the course of matter, not in the light, yes in the sea that envelops him in branches
and with him, always to reappear.

EVERYTHING UNDER HIS ARDOR IS MERCILESS. He solidifies.
My Friend requests a bit of silence. In the unspoken, in what doesn't happen,
in the incomplete and inconclusive. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

He chooses his binnacle.
Separation is always an uncomfortable emergence.
Instant when the thread separates from the eye.
What doesn't look. What doesn't break. A brief expansion that proposes the abundance
of life. The cut.

Wherever it is. Sweetest, damaged, delirious.
Wherever it goes. Belonging.

Flaring. In the highest and clearest. Next to the magnitude of celestial bodies.
Leaving at the speed of sky, in gassing clouds, infrequently,
involuntarily, obscurely disdained in lure of dawn, dear monster
that I ignore, voice, unique, broken voice, prayer of me, mine.

FORGETFULNESS.

The link of one's own imaginary heart.
 And excellence, licking the only scars beside a night fire.
 And the map.

My Friend remembers the path of the beetle, the red dregs, the high arch
 where his blood stutters.
 He prefers not to enter the butterfly's shadow, the beating of their wings perfumes
 the killer's air.
 The security of annihilation is traced in the spores.

He says: an ebony table will be the place for revealing things.
 The public, all of it, the sum total of my disciples.

No one to interpret their silent hands, the eye's dignity.
 The table flames to the wind. Paints a copper line. Its excretions.

A rare thing to possess the minimum. At times, they cling to rocks, triumph
 of scant grace beside the dust.

We men, have been straying behind. Held back, we think
 that everything is human life.

If there's ever a time you doubt the dawn... Search, search for the one who dies in your memories so
 that you go and witness the reservoir under your eyelids.

My Friend says that all is circumstance.

The barbarians scrub the bodies of their dead with hyssop. Clean their intestines
 with loose salt in oil so they sweat fire. After, they lick them until they taper.

The sound of rain creaks through the window. A leopard embroidered in gold.

My Friend says that living
 is merely a distinct gaze at the ordinary.

پامچال / Pamtchal / Primrose

She, my mother, is named after the flower Primrose, or more correctly after its Persian name پامچال / Pamtchal, a name not that common in my mother tongue, Persian, the same way she, her life story, is not common. Or that is how I like to think about it. I say, “mother tongue,” to only immediately have a vision of mom’s Persian handwriting, simple and basic, similar to a child’s handwriting in elementary school, and remember that she only studied Persian up to third grade before being sent to a boarding school in Switzerland for four years to return to Tehran but to continue to study at a French school. As a child I found it fascinating that my mother had another language besides Persian, a language she sometimes used to speak to her father, my grandfather, with whom we lived, making French *their* language, private to the two of them, a language neither of them ever spoke to or taught us the kids so we did not pick it up, though I did eventually begin to learn it in my early twenties when I started my undergraduate studies in translation. This privacy of language was one aspect of the special bond my mother had with her father, a bond whose origins demands a story of its own told at length at its own time, but to not leave you, my dear reader, hanging, here is the short version of it, at least how it has been told in the family, the myth that it has become. The story goes that when my mother was born, my grandmother, her mother, made a demand of my grandfather, the details of which are not revealed or clear, while she was still in the hospital, threatening him that if he did not fulfill her wishes she would abandon him and the baby. He did not, and so the baby, my mother, was sent back home with the driver. And my mother’s mother left. As you see this anecdote does not make much sense and has many gaps in it, but no one in the family speaks about it in more detail and I have not gotten any clarification the few times I asked about it, and so these few lines of narrative remain to be the story of my mother’s beginnings and that of her close relationship to her father, my grandfather, a man of many mysteries of whom I’m still in awe to this day. But let’s go back to the girl who arrived in the world and in the house and was named پامچال , transliterated as Pamtchal, which for you equals to Primrose, though one of the first lessons you are taught as a translator-in-training is to not translate proper names, which is a rule that holds up only until it does not, depending on the context of the name and the role it plays in the source text, the original one, as well as the function and purpose of the target text, the text in translation. The not-to-be-translated name, Pamtchal, which I understand might not be

easy for you to pronounce but I hope you give yourself the trouble to practice pronouncing properly rather than to dismiss or butcher, as unfortunately is the case with many non-American names, was used less often in our familial settings and instead was replaced with the shortened form Pamy, pronounced with a long /aa/ sound not an /a/ sound. In my teenage years, I was adamant to call my mother by this shortened name instead of calling her *mom* or by her full name, perhaps as part of my teenager self's hopes to move away from the hierarchical child-mother relationship toward being on a par with her, performing independence while remaining close and intimate. I have yet to hear of another Iranian girl or woman named پامچال / Pamtchal, but the word itself and the flower it represents did of course exist beyond the walls of our house long before my mother's birth. The first instance of it that I personally remember as part of the larger experience of the Iranian life goes back to my own childhood years and a TV series called گل پامچال , *Gol-e Pamtchal*, or *The Primrose Flower*. I type these two titles as equivalents, but I am baffled at how they feel different in my body. The English is informational, factual, while the Persian is accompanied by music, the one playing at the beginning of the series' episodes, a song that before the airing of the series I took to primarily belong to my mom and our family, believing that a friend of my grandfather had written the lyrics and composed the music just for her, but in truth while my grandfather and other family members did sing it to my mom, the song had an older history and the lyrics were written by Seyyed Jafar Mehrdad and the song was performed for the first time in 1951 before my mother was born. There is, however, a connection here between the private and the public of the song, which I learn when I ask mom about it while writing this essay, and it is that the song was played every Friday, our day of the weekend in Iran, from the national public radio in the late 1950s because my grandfather had made a request from a friend who worked in the broadcasting company. Over the years, the song continued its life in various versions in the public sphere, until decades later, it turned once again into a popular song present in many households around the country through the series *Gol-e Pamtchal*. In the first draft of this essay, I wrote that the series ran on TV in the 1980s, during the years of the Iran-Iraq war, which started when I was three and lasted for eight years, though it reached the capital city of Tehran where we lived only in its later years; I wrote that the series ran on one of the few existing state-run broadcasting channels during those childhood years of war and electricity shutdowns and rationalized coupons for basic resources such as gasoline and milk. I wrote these words because that is how I remembered the events, the war and my family watching the series together to be simultaneous, but then I went on the fact-checking route and found out that the series actually went on air in 1991, that is three years after the war came to an end. And this is

interesting to me, my dear reader, not because, obviously, it reveals the unreliability of memory, but because it makes me see how the series, with its fictional story of the war and the hardships of its survivors, seeped out of the frame of the magical box of the TV to allow a continuation, in our imagination, of the war and all that it entailed years after the war had actually ended on the ground, enmeshing the post-war time with the time of the war, extending that connection all the way to this day many decades later in my body and psyche. The series was about a young girl, played by a novice actress, Setareh Jafari, who at the time of the broadcasting was twelve years old, only two years younger than me, who, [according to the director](#) Mohammad Talebi, like the character she played, was a war refugee from the southern provinces, whose family had lost all they had in the war and moved to the capital, though, in the series, her character ends up in the north of the country at the shores of the Caspian Sea. And it is here in the north, in the forests of one of the provinces by this largest lake in the world, so large to make it be called a sea rather than a lake, in Gilan province, that wild primroses grow in the middle of the winter to signal the arrival of spring. And it is from this province that my maternal ancestors come from. My mother's great grandfather, that is her grandmother's father, [حکیم صبوری / Hakim Sabouri](#), was the [مدیر الاطباء / Modir al-Atteba](#) of the city of Rasht, the capital of Gilan province, a title that means he was the chief doctor of the city of Rasht, a city known for its progressive social movements including ones for women's rights, thus historically boasting to its strong women and openminded culture, though it has also been, not surprising for the Iranian patriarchal culture, often been represented, especially through jokes, as a city whose men are unmanly, not man enough to defend their women's and their families' and their culture's chastity and dignity. Of this ancestor, there was a portrait, an old-style photograph of a man in profile in black and white, the background color of the photograph turning the yellow of the passage of time, hanging in my grandfather's medical office, as he too was a doctor, a gastroenterologist, one of the best in the country capital Tehran, whose office was simply in our house, or rather his house, because our family of four, my father, mother, and we the two kids, were the ones who lived in his house not the other way around, an office that didn't even have an official sign but brought patients in from all over the country, patients who would travel and sit around for hours to be seen by the doctor "whose hand" they believed "brought recovery," the phrase being a literal translation of a Persian idiom describing a skilled doctor who can heal patients in ways others can't, and I remember that while I was growing up, the word on the street, or around our house, was that my grandfather could, without even the need for x-rays and tests, diagnose and cure ailments that other doctors had failed to. And so I guess it is safe to say that my grandfather was indeed a

worthy successor to this ancestor حكيم صبوري / Hakim Sabouri. The word Hakim translates to doctor or physician, though there is yet another layer of meaning to it, as it is a title mainly used for doctors in the old days, or if used today, solely for alternative medicine practitioners who practice the ancient Persian medicine belonging to the world of ابن سينا / Ibn Sina, or as you call him, Avicenna, a name that has come to life through a mispronunciation/mistranslation process that the page on him on Wikipedia calls a “a Latin corruption,” defined on another Wikipedia page as “Latinisation (or Latinization) of names, also known as onomastic Latinisation, [which] is the practice of rendering a non-Latin name in a modern Latin style.” The word حكيم / hakim holds one more layer of meaning beyond the temporal one mentioned, a layer that comes from its being in Arabic in the conjugation form فعيل , which is used to make صفت مشببه or adjectives that are constant qualities for a person; for example, in this case, حكيم / hakim, created from the root letters ح ك م / h k m of the Arabic verb حكم , means that the person is one who always has wisdom, thus making the doctor more than a doctor, makes him a man of wisdom, sharing that adjective with God, as Hakim is also one of the names of the monolith God in Islam, meaning The All-Wise, which, according to an internet page about the name, is repeated thirty-three times in the Quran. So now that we are back on the subject of names, let us, my dear reader, go back to the name we started with, or rather its English equivalent, Primrose, well not exactly the name but the signifier the name is taken from, which, according to Merriam-Webster, is “any of a genus (*Primula* of the family Primulaceae, the primrose family) of perennial herbs with large tufted basal leaves and showy variously colored flowers,” and comes from the “Middle English *primerose*, from Anglo-French, from *prime* first + *rose* rose,” one that is documented to have been first used in the 15th century. As a name, and the piece of information I’m going to share below is honestly one that belongs more to the realm of trivia knowledge not wisdom, so I wonder what purpose it serves anyone and whether you would even want to read it, but anyway, I’m just going to leave it here for you to do whatever you desire to do with it. According to [Ancestry](#) website, citing the *Dictionary of American Family Names* (2nd Edition, 2022), as a family name, Primrose is a Scottish “habitational name from the lands of Primrose (Fife). The placename is probably of Celtic origin containing Pictish or Gaelic *ros* ‘wooded promontory’ with an uncertain first element,” while in English, it is a “nickname from the name of a flower Old French *primerole* altered in English and Scots to *-rose*.” But perhaps more interesting to you, if you are into pop culture and all that, is the information that the first name Primrose became popular in 2015 following *Hunger Game*’s character Primrose Everdeen. According to a [Slate article](#) on the meanings of the names of the series’ characters, the characters who are named after “plants

or other earthy items” are the ones “from the poor, depleted districts,” even though primrose is historically considered to be “the king’s cure-all for its medicinal uses.” I can’t make any claims about the cure-all aspect of this statement, but following a conversation with a colleague about what I was working on at one of our faculty writing sessions in the library during the winter break which is not really a break because it is the time you do the work of research and writing that you need to do to keep your work of teaching that enables you to do the work of writing, I’m told that Evening Primrose Oil (EPO) is suggested as a supplement for menopause, a conversation that leads the two of us to talk about hot flashes and bodily changes and the lack of medical research and support for pre-, post-, and menopausal women, and I share with her the title of the book I’m reading, *Flash Count Diary, Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life*, by Darcey Steinke, which was recommended to me by another lovely colleague and writer during a conversation we had after her book launch in the Greenlights Bookstore in Fort Greene Brooklyn a few years ago, a book that, my dear reader, if you live in a female body and are in the middle years of your life, I highly recommend to you, though when those middle years are and when the symptoms of menopause hit you and what those symptoms are vary from one individual to another, but I recommend it anyway for when you find yourself in those years of your life, which for me happened early, the same way my mom’s did, in her forties, right after the death of her father, my grandfather. Though I can recommend the book, I cannot recommend EPO, as I’m not a doctor, just making sure the disclaimer is here, but I can report that *WebMD* lists among Evening Primrose’s health benefits alleviating Premenstrual Syndrome and providing Menopausal relief, and I want to confess here that I personally am tempted to try the oil to ease down my own constant hot flashes that appear out of nowhere and disappear the same way they have appeared. But let’s move on from this conversation on menopause as I’ve been told many times that it is not a topic to be discussed in public, though this is a position I find not surprising but very displeasing if not problematic. Anyway, moving on. I need to add here that Evening Primrose and primrose, despite their name similarities in English (this is not the case in Persian as the latter is called گل مغربی / Gol-e Maghrebi or Western Flower which is completely different from گل پامچال), the two flowers are not of the same family or even of the same order and also look quite different from one another. Now let’s just go back to the more personal stories related to the flower and the name that are the subject of this entry. On a wall in my parents’ apartment in Tehran, there is a framed handwritten calligraphy of a poem entitled “The primrose flower.” The poem, dating back to 1970, is dedicated to my grandfather and is about my mother, starting with the line, “نوگل بُستان نامی پامچال نازنین / همچو گل اندر گلستان است و با گل همنشین” / “The

new blossom of the Namy garden, our beloved Pamtchal / She is like a flower in a flower garden, sitting next to a flower,” ending with the line “شو خموش ای فانی در وصف حُسن پامچال / کی ز کلک تو برآید” / “Be silent, oh you the mortal, in describing Pamtchal’s virtues / How can your pen describe the light of the two eyes?” The poem is signed as “Dedicated by Badri Tondari, known as Fani [Mortal], to the beloved light of the eyes Ms. Pamtchal, daughter of Dr. Nader Namy.” This is the extent of information I have about the woman composing it and penning it in Persian calligraphy to share with you. But what I can share is that as I type these words, the song گل پامچال, *Gol-e Pamtchal*, is playing on my Spotify Liked Songs playlist, the singer Naser Masoudi singing “گل پامچال، گل پامچال، بیرون بیا، بیرون بیا، فصل بهاران . . .” / “Primrose, primrose, come out, come out, it’s time for spring . . .” in Gilaki language which is the language of the Gilan province, a language of which I know nothing really, except that I carry a memory of its rhythms and tones in my body from when my grandfather spoke it on the phone with some of his Gilani friends and colleagues, along with just one phrase from the language “تی قربان بشم من” / “Ti ghorban besham man,” the closest translation of which may be “I love you,” but that is not really the translation as the phrase is used in a much wider range of contexts and relationships and could imply other meanings too. This expression of love reminds me that many years ago, when I went to a painting class, whose instructor’s name evades me now though not her image and not some of the details of her apartment at which she held the classes, during the phase I was learning to paint with pastel, one of the first paintings I did was of a clay box full of primroses on a surface of snow and I believe, though my memory might be playing me tricks, I gifted that, framed, to my mother, which based on the season of primroses and the snow, should have been for my parents’ wedding anniversary, or maybe it was just a gift per se with no particular reason or maybe it was gifted to her much later for her birthday in summer. The painting is still hanging on a wall in my parents’ apartment in Tehran, on one end of the kitchen next to the living room/TV room, while on the other end of the kitchen where the family dining table is in a foyer connected to the kitchen hangs another pastel painting I did as a gift to my father of a set of porcelain dinnerware with other flower patterns, a set that was designed and produced by a company my father founded and ran for a while. My dear reader, allow me to share with you one more personal memory about primroses before I begin to wrap up this rambling of mine. Many years ago, for a party whose occasion I can no longer remember, one of the last parties my ex-husband and I threw at my childhood house, the house that appeared earlier in this piece, where we often threw our parties because it was much nicer and bigger than our own apartment, I designed a centerpiece with several small pots of primroses arranged in a big copper

tray that belonged to my mother's grandmother, surrounding the pots with snow collected from the courtyard and placing between them several candles, creating a centerpiece that turned out gorgeous and appears in some photographs from that party which I have not looked at for a long time now. And perhaps this is as good a place as any for me to move on to the last bit about primroses I want to share with you, to end this essay on a note that is closer to your culture, my beloved reader in the English language, lest I be accused of missing an important piece of information about the flowers that relates to your beloved writer Shakespeare. According to librarian [Mareike Doleschal](#) on *Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust's* website, Shakespeare mentions primroses seven times in his work, first time in *Hamlet* where he coins the phrase "primrose path," which, according to Doleschal, stands for "a path strewn with flowers," and means a "path of pleasure, indulgence, or the easy route to life," a path of sins that leads to hell. The flower, however, based on other sources, has in English folklore "[a long associated history with fairies](#)" and has thus been nicknamed "fairy cups," leading people to believe that if they ate them, they would see fairies. So, my beloved reader, I'll leave you now with all these stories and bits and pieces of information, and it is upon you, or rather your memory, to pick and choose what you want to remember the next time you find yourself in the presence of the beautiful primrose flower.

Anna Mendelssohn never settled on a label for the life writing I am tasked with introducing. For her, these unpaginated, achronological, episodic, and incomplete typescripts were “a story/film/play/poem/musical/comedy about someone who didn’t want to be the person described.”¹ Alternatively, she characterises this processual text as “extracts from my political poetic ~~work~~ novel of 16 years” noting with regret that “2/3...has gone missing” and may be scattered around London while “[s]ome has ~~definitely~~ been destroyed.” Mendelssohn sums up this roman à clef as follows: “It runs to just over 3,500 pages and includes various illustrations, but no photographs.”² Encyclopaedic, diagrammatic, but not a realistic portrait in sight. “[T]he only point of writing” claims Mendelssohn elsewhere, is “to obviate my self”.³

An avant-garde author, artist, and activist, Anna Mendelssohn was born in a small town southeast of Manchester in 1948. From the 1980s she studied and resided in Cambridge, publishing 15 poetry collections and contributing to landmark anthologies of the British Poetry Revival, among them, Denise Riley’s *Poets on Writing* (1992) and Iain Sinclair’s *Conductors of Chaos* (1996). Mendelssohn created incessantly: when she died in 2009, she was living in an off-grid garden shed stacked to the ceiling with paintings, musical compositions, unsent correspondence, tens of thousands of loose-leaf writings and drawings, and 800 well-worn notebooks.

Mendelssohn’s three children generously donated these papers to the University of Sussex in 2010. When her archive was catalogued, a set of typescripts surfaced indicating that between the late 1970s and early 1990s, Mendelssohn was drafting an episodic, fragmented roman à clef of which her closest associates were unaware. Having completed a critical edition of the poems Mendelssohn prepared for publication, I am now on a Leverhulme Research Fellowship devoted to biographizing and editing Mendelssohn’s life writing. Currently at 500 pages, the book draws its title from one of its most intensively edited extracts, *What a Performance*.

Mendelssohn was born into a working-class Jewish family. A one-time communist, her father fought with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War; her mother was a member of Manchester International Women for Peace. Unable to complete their own state schooling, Mendelssohn’s parents were culturally aspirational for their two daughters: Mendelssohn belonged to a youth orchestra and local papers celebrated her performances at elocution contests and theatrical productions. Yet it is a refrain of Mendelssohn’s archive that no devoted leftist ever sufficiently supported her creativity. Within her family of origin and as a participant in protest movements, Mendelssohn was often instructed to prioritise politics over art.

Mendelssohn’s own political activism proved all-determining. She was a defendant at the Stoke Newington Eight criminal trial of 1972, then the lengthiest trial in British legal history. As a student

¹ See SxMs109/1/B/1/39/1. All references beginning “SxMs109” refer to files in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive at the University of Sussex Special Collections. This quotation is drawn from another part of Mendelssohn’s text that I edited, annotated, and introduced in 2018 for the *PMLA* (see 133.3, pp. 610–30).

² SxMs109/5/B/1/1b.

³ SxMs109/1/B/1/26.

radical at the University of Essex, Mendelssohn had appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's polemical *British Sounds* (1969) before joining The Angry Brigade, Britain's contribution to a late-1960s transnational wave of urban guerrilla groups. Still lacking the comprehensive histories devoted to their counterparts – America's Weatherman, Germany's Red Army Faction – The Angry Brigade shared their anti-imperialism and less lethal methods, prioritising Irish reunification, social equality, and autonomism.

Pleading innocent, Mendelssohn was sentenced to ten years for conspiracy to cause explosions. A literacy tutor in prison, she was paroled in 1976. In the 1980s, she changed her name to Grace Lake, had three children, and began an English degree at the University of Cambridge. Unwell and parenting alone, she was closely supported by a family who ultimately initiated proceedings with the Family Division of Britain's High Court. As she writes in *What a Performance*, at least one lawyer advised her that her radical past would not serve her well in a custody contest. This second judicial conflict ended in 1988 when Mendelssohn's children became wards of the state; the family subsequently became their permanent guardians.

Mendelssohn's contemporaries, Jewish-American urban guerrillas Susan Stern and Jane Alpert, published confessional, fluid, realist autobiographies that appeal to reader sympathy. By contrast, Mendelssohn's life narrative is experimental, elliptical, bellicose, and satirical. She mixes poetry with prose, juxtaposes discernible referent with the coded or obscurified. Throughout, Mendelssohn foregrounds the marginalised feminised subject, and the woman writer in particular.

Mendelssohn tells us about her family of origin, her own much-loved children, and the complexities of being an intellectually ambitious single parent at the University of Cambridge in Thatcherite England. She discusses her dreams, many related to the trauma of growing up a post-Holocaust Jew in a small Northern town. She indexes poverties: her own, that of the English coal miners striking through 1984 and 1985. She mocks the Queen and the Angry Brigade. She brings us into her everyday – its milk gone sour, its creamy cigarettes – and mentions associates, among them, the poet Tom Raworth and British Black Panther Darcus Howe. A bibliophile, Mendelssohn's reading is a refrain encompassing Shakespeare, Tzara, Benjamin, Jong, and countless others.

What a Performance is more apologia than confession: when Mendelssohn is sorry, it tends to be for the uncomprehending privileged who remain inured to others' constraints. Vilified by the British press in the 1970s and disregarded by masculinised vanguards in the decades that followed, Mendelssohn rejects autobiographical disclosures Augustinian or feminine. She calls her reader a "STUPID PRAT"; she commands us to read her as we would Dostoyevsky, Blake, or Gramsci; she assumes the worst about our interpretive abilities and motivations, as in: "I suggest to you that in future you do not exercise such a facile interest in terrorism."⁴ Yet her powerful, unabashed narrative voice compels, meaning Mendelssohn keeps us both at bay and at work.

Mendelssohn can be an autobiographer as unwilling as she is unlikely. Too reductively, we might read her work as a continuation of legal trauma. As she tells us: "This text is written in self-defence. To ward off further encroachment into the interior which is disinclined to construct more penitentiaries."⁵ But if autobiography is an act of self-creation that risks censure, in Mendelssohn's

⁴ These references can be located in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive under the following call numbers: SxMs109/1/B/1/11; SxMs109/1/B/1/4; SxMs109/1/B/1/45.

⁵ SxMs109/1/B/1/40.

case, it is also an act of re-creation. In *What a Performance*, Mendelssohn anticipates her detractors: “You will say: what have you done with your life? There is no evidence of success.” This envisioned dissent is met with a typical vanguard confidence: “Others will copy me. [...] I found no-one like me. They will copy me.”⁶

EDITORIAL PROCESS & PERMISSIONS

If I have any qualms about the extracts that I’ve chosen for *Tupelo Quarterly*, it is that they offer a false sense of coherency, beginning and ending as they do with references to Wordsworth. Mendelssohn’s take on “I wandered lonely as a cloud” is plucked from a three-page prose disquisition on the leftists who did too little to defend her when she was arrested. As so often in *What a Performance*, an unnamed “you” is the addressee in this incomplete fragment, and the natural world is blissful reprieve from the impetus toward politics that Mendelssohn experienced as overwhelming ethical obligation from childhood onward. But as the final extract here indicates, Wordsworth is a flashpoint situated in real-life event: elsewhere in her papers, Mendelssohn writes to a parental figure who “held Wordsworth against her”, while doing precious little to keep her from entering the “deep dark pit” of extremist activism.⁷

Mendelssohn’s punctuation is deliberately erratic, and I have standardised most of the continuous prose paragraphs in what follows, while staying truer to poetically formatted irregularities. The lower-case “i” is used as often as the upper-case pronoun throughout all of her writing, with results discernibly affective or ideological. Similarly, Mendelssohn consistently renders nation-states and proper nouns of affiliation as common nouns or adjectives. The anti-Semitic slur Mendelssohn self-reflexively deploys is not asterisked in the original.

These five pieces are extracts of extracts; the numbered passages are drawn from two different files and the error in numbering – an error affirmed by paragraph continuity – is Mendelssohn’s own. I believe that these works are presented chronologically, running from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, but this belief is more educated guess than certainty. In order of appearance, these extracts are drawn from the following files in the Anna Mendelssohn Archive at Sussex Special Collections: SxMs109/5/B/2/13; 1/B/1/46/3; 1/B/1/15; 1/B/1/25; 1/B/1/43.

Permission to publish this work was kindly provided by the estate of Anna Mendelssohn.

—Sara Crangle

⁶ SxMs109/1/B/1/17.

⁷ SxMs109/5/B/2/160.

Anna Mendelssohn
What a Performance | Extracts

Pale Daffodils:
must i hate your silence
sheafed in a swirl?
must i charge you with revolutionary passivity?
do you make me rage? your very existence?
haven't you suffered enough having been cut?

does your arrangement dissatisfy me?
would any way you stood drive me insane?

to breathe together:
afraid to kiss
heavens falling
night of bliss

occlude the reasons for their removal

she was seen as unfit to be party to daffodils
will they run a road through her brain?

tissue life: metal bound
can they fork your musings with electrified prongs?
double-trouble to one is forked-tongue to another,
in despair, sweet talking, laying over canopy,
judging future mates by their economic weights,
to aestheticize your own rise.

Hill: are you insufficiently puzzling?

that you should absorb her fascination
whilst I have revolutionary business to do,
she involves her mind with landforms,
such as you.

× × × × ×

The I is too strong for the dimensions.

Sh. Sh.

Walked away. Dedicated the *lack* of answer to different weight in words. One answer for the minute – to *appease*. *When the working-class woman walks out in a dress* no-one necessarily COMMENTS but she is sufficiently afraid that they are saying something – such as? – and a very stern questioner asks for firm examples. Who do you think you are walking out in a dress like that? A dress of *that* kind, flowers all over it. There are echoes here, of having had too many dirty jobs to do.

She rolled up her shirt sleeves to be like her father, to get down to work, to help him.

Someone suggested with seeming knowingness, that she had probably stolen the dress.

Whereas the dress had stolen her.

She had wanted to be extremely neat and clean.

The people who were walking down the road were screwing up their faces against the fumes from the traffic which was far too heavy for such a narrow road.

Behind the road, from the bus, there was that story of gardens. When people could be friendly with one another. The writer did not have to enter into the road talk – it was garden, house and narrow life talk really – there were issues, the women were looking after us with shops, prices, mothers, and mildly jovial attitudes towards husbands.

When a working-class woman tries to rise, she might not fit in. She will be criticized for acquiring the attributes, style, books, language, dress, habits, power of the intellectual upper-class. Anyone who got there before her will test their wits against hers and never take her quite seriously or let her get a look in on their credentials.

“In Spain, she will have to prove herself a peasant,” they mutter. They are still bothered, worried by peasants, but a lot less than they are worried by her.

When we are all floating on the ceiling we shall have banners of working-class women cherubs embroidered in gold, green, vermilion and white on satin which billows in the wind on plains away from the traffic where new cities have been built out of concrete marble chains

oh when we are happy again
and our happiness is not judged.

as the Trade Union Banners depicted scenes from labouring life and the victory of union – our cherubs are hovering round the old dining room light, the one covered with an upturned glass bowl wherein the flies used to land, creep and die.

They could do with being a lot more worried about peasants, ensuring that they did not die, caring for them with deep interest, love and respect – giving them another dimension to their hard lives, and giving themselves another dimension too, love and respect of the poor and humble.

The writer is born into a working-class family. She has the fascination with language from the beginning. She lies in bed and listens attentively to the sound of her mother talking downstairs.

She lives in a two-up two-down. There is a box room which is full of the junk of everyday lives. She would like it as her own room.

I don't want to be posh like you. I haven't had it like you and I don't want there to be any mistake about that.

They will be looking for faults, the other people in the street. We used to say street for it was more liveable in than road. Road was on the edge of things. (How I can hear someone laughing about *things*.) No time to live in a road. Explanations, then associative thinking. Both love and memory, short cut.

Her sister is in a romantic city, having an unromantic time.

Her disadvantages come to her so many times that although she never doubts that her love of words sounds meanings music books (pale carpets) and silence, apart from wind trees sea birds thunder (on occasion), she has to carry this attachment over her left shoulder, there stuck, of the working classes.

She must tidy the painting up, paint round the ends of the lines so that no one can observe how much nicer it would be if it was neatened up.

It must be endemic, this scruffiness.

Look at them falling apart into tufts of hairy, hairy balls –
living creatures, global insects on the dusty bare earth.

hardened into rock

she won't scrape her shoulder
against and across
a jagged edge
oo said the two stuffed dolls looking at knitted humpty
dumpty who sat smiling benignly resembling the
Duke of York quite as much, between them.

Brain tax

Food tax

Road tax what does it mean Gunflower Hotel?

Images of flower.

Détente.

Then they'll come along, as they usually have done –
deep in love, the needle strikes.

And take her away, take her writing one way and her another
Humpty Dumpty rules, O.K. she said, they'll say
we can make a light farce out of her fears

well-founded NOW she must say
this was our past is our present
Lachesis Chlothe and Atropis in
rags, glad rags or their pearls:

oh you're NOT going to walk out naked wearing only
a rope of twisted stuff. True Target to do that.

[...]

× × × × ×

2. THAT SEA LOOKS NOTHING LIKE basically.

there is opinion going on and it isn't all about the same.

when you are as ugly as me you DIE for beauty.

WHO WROTE a theory about 'Intimacy'?

Marcel Proust's a boost but it wasn't him.

(servant) couldn't get to the film: no babysitter.

The woman who partially understands writing or rather the meaning behind it, is Me. One person thinks differently from another.

Digging for agreement.

I suppose it's a piece of machinery. The city. What IS sexuality? A function? At least sexuality functions in a time of anarchy. OBVIOUSLY basically has a hard bottom.

SPIRIT. Someone BANGED the table. Banged ON implies a complaint. Oh the women at the bus stop, gossiping, with their old faces entrenched in know-all expressions. Postscripts to the arse-staring men. And worse.

He knocked her off, she's hidden her face ever since.

Blue seventy... She can read back.

I wish I wish I wish

the old man who walks over the bridge into this part of town, another life wherein he might prosper... happily. Delicately and happily. Only what I've heard...extended, the moon brackets, Sydney Bechet's horn, a wild entry far removed from the norm. Trailing finger steps, anonymously forlorn. Recognised. Inhabitable.

what is their obsession with form?

Set.

Match. Don't say Match and mean a game. Chivvy, chivvy, chivvy an alien comma... reach out and grasp hand-lotioned friendliness. The mist rises round his ears. Say you HATE what you LOVE. Collapse with Pride.

3. Truculence departs . Flippancy had served to trigger continuation.

Meaningless to the baby.

Shabby.

Isn't it curious?

Sparkling water: re-explain.

It's different when your father's a bank manager.

It's different when your sister's a ballet dancer.

It's different when they give you security.

Free tickets and Houses. Free tickets and Houses.

I've got SHERRY in the morning then a cup of tea.

What on earth do I have to explain post codes to a three-year-old for?

I had a friend who questioned for? for? for? and one who.... smiled secretly.

Free books and time to read them. Free books and time to read them.

Stand up who has both, name the glory.

I don't even want to be here. I don't even want to be you.

I wanted to be somewhere else with a long-distance memory.

no...um, quite.

they are easy and they don't use their brains.

leaves me dried up, snapping off, glum.

4. to even BOTHER to mix with people of the same sex.

men OR women who are looking for sex first.

Totally useless. That there is nothing creative about a situation other than love of the word "this". Other than running down the street skipping. Celebrating lightness of the belly after pregnancy.

what a difference the sunshine makes!

been round today. before consciousness dawned understated.

Sydney Bunsen-Burner, how many times has the ignition knob dropped off? Cellotape.

None.

the why which was never heard.

and you SHOULD... in that cellotaped catarrhal fashion . .

[...]

sunk in sleep...the hand went writing round the edge of the rocks soared down to the tea was reminiscent of shit dissolving in the bog, the cup looked like under the tea bag, the earthy wrinkled hands which had knitted and sewn, a care-lack town, down from the north, whispered protests, whispery drawn.

Sunshine will out! Blood called: there is murder in everyone. Those who cross the line must be helped. There are no two ways about it.

Root deep enough. The causes are there. Don't reserve your ground, even your sympathy is ineffective.

[...]

they have done this, they have measured mountains, they do not own measured mountains for my own enjoyment there being no publishing houses joke.

pleading for washing, begging for washing.

because it was critical politically. All is peace. The tree has no mouth, an ear on each branch, silent catkins. Imagination interposing a dove brooch made from yellowing mother of pearl.

There were always other daughters for her and now there are other

mothers for me. We have worked out NO code other than blind sincerity,

she cannot take honesty, that is all I want.

when the gestapo are coming, i understand Ireland.

5. until we had taken the verbatim terror out of the case's cotton flanky

a little free

down in the flood shed

my how my hair curls!

Eating's dead, slap slap mummy's back. Think of something nice. I was lying thinking of these nice thoughts which turned into sweets for the kids. Sweets/there is a paratrooper in the fridge. go on . . echo Does that mean that things are GOING worse? Or better? It must be awful to die i wish i could have fun with someone like let's get down to the obscene but it isn't obscene at all. Captain rain, rain was green, outside the song a window has been written about baBANg it's very hard not to take people seriously, why didn't they let us read? 'There is a reason for this'... life became mysterious.

it's ALL RIGHT being refined
that's the way we can criticise conversation as a mode lacking in literate.....
they are reflections, friends...Friends without the capital. I didn't used to like whatever my mother bought me . . then gave up taste. Do we despair of our daughters' egos? Ego was an insult . . came to sound like an insult. Ego and vanity. Jerk! i don't like being thought of as wonderful. i want to get lost. bizarrred as a servant, rain smells, for the sake of art. Which chapter, the disillusion . . my father showed he was depressed for years, i don't think people's love should be thwarted. We listen for any clue. They stopped arguing at sixty-five. A boring northern existence. He had mythical sons and told them to be engineers. It didn't seem that promising. The rain didn't help. Could you expect a fuchsia plant? Antagonism to 'bought' has to do with the language of a trader. He tried to sell me, as a joke. You like me to make you sad. I don't want to sadden you further. WHERE WAS THEIR EDUCATION? and now the conservative government are curtailing education and encouraging fat, rich rats to continue their success. I don't know how to put it. The whore I feel I am yet know I am not. Men's values drip from my blasted arm. She walks away from bodies, "saddened by what she had to do." What on earth is he clinging onto a dog for? . . perpetuating the disease. Cancer. They say it isn't infectious. I don't know whether to believe

7. the doctors or not. Edward Hopper disappeared with fluorescence. It's the table rat; rat on.
No memory. Blank the after-effects of terrible pain: childbirth: hung four leaves out to dry
on a tree's lowest branch.

CRACK.

This page is based on "failure", "almost." so what? he kept saying. So what if you
know that *surtidor* in spanish means fountain and *parpados* is not the (same) name as a fascist
dictator? I think the man's mad. Bleached in fluorescence. Wandering through the woods,
hearing their call, the pull of oblivion stronger, more caressing more and more caressing,
spacious.

but I'm not inviting you, I want it for mySELF.

GREEN VELVET MOUNTAINS.

6. i walk
i walk
what a shame
over bodies i love
(I left to become a poet
charming
no touch all thought)
doctors have special dispensation
those bodies are part of the aftermath
- famous trottoir
heavenly walk
light tucked in corners

metaphysical mother

northern wry

she knew how much life

went and meant.

× × × × ×

i also think it highly unfair
that if a child, brought up
to be a speech and drama teacher
or a communist headmistress,
herself not wanting to boss,
administer or organise
other people, because her
head was always in books,
because she wanted to get away
to write her own writing,
she had stored so much of
this desire, this overriding
desire, this was her 'plot'
if plot it is. not closely
investigating other people's
lives. don't you understand
she does not want people
to report her to the police
or talk to her as though
she were a bomber or a thief
the bombers and the thieves
wanted her on their side
because they were afraid
that she would inform on them
this is not a lie. it is not
a lie.

[...]

there is no time for explanation.

please don't think i am stupid
because i walk or travel by bus.
i don't know how this comes out.
is it an incitement poem?
it must not be. i don't want women
taking up arms in my defence. that is not
the meaning, the quest ? of poetry. and neither would
i want future editors USING my mind as an example
of how duped, deluded, k**ey, psychopathic and mistaken i was
(and am) down to the very being of the last time i
set eyes (which love) (not beam artificially) on my children,
To redirect a poetess after death, i don't think
that editors should reign victorious over their
subjects. that is a feature of academia i dislike,
no sooner are you dead than you are
bones, brains, circulation of the blood,
ground to dust, dried and reshaped.

[...]

it was not a 'wait', i was not asking for how to write
i was asking for permission to write.
because there seemed to be a misunderstanding
or else why was
a volume of wordsworth so rapidly hidden from my view
when i had been up in the library reading wordsworth?

[...]

the male poets continue to be obnoxious to
me. they block conversation, analysis,
thinking is refused, they have now heard
of women's writing, which means
i can utter as a woman, on things womanly,
such asmen? yet their language is
universal, philosophy ungendered.
when they speak of women writers in hushed
tones, they look down, as though they were
speaking of the dead or the dying. women's
poetry continues to lack muscle. fails on
objectivity andungendered universality.

russian poetesses . . indeed russian poetry readers
are renowned for their drama, renowned . . russian.

that would be paradise.

to be safe. not locked up. not tied up. but safe.
in a broad-minded, but yes, one which did not beg
description. in a – ‘house for the insane’ – these
phrases used so lightly. it is where the poor
artists are put. no counting up
accounting. it is the air i breathe. life itself.

[...]

Carla Harryman

from *Scales for the Living*

Canyon

You know about dreams.

In some circles it's uncouth to include movie producers in them.

Or screenwriters.

I am not talking about—

I know the alternatives.

For which—

Or whom there are no names.

So.

So.

I'll tell you anyway. Jobs are unsatisfying however you look at them.

So. Wait for me.

Here in the distance.

In a canyon mud surrounds a swimming pool made out to look like a natural swimming hole. You have to be in the scene to know the water is chlorinated.

Are you sure it was chlorinated?

I was in the scene and it was off-gassing. No one swam when I was present, though I waited around for someone to take the first plunge. I want to paint a picture, but that includes people and people can get in the way of the picture. When you find the producer, his spindly legs and matted hair prematurely grey his frenetic gestures of pointing and waving, spinning around in a nearly beet-red rage, then stopped in a sequence of cool stances a beer in one hand and a host-like observance of the party, you forget for an instant that you are in a canyon and that your host, however temperamental, wants to protect nature. It's a place of longing and dangerous mudslides, but it's the scent of mud-water, chlorine, and dry chaparral when its tonic is just fading a bit that begins to fix the picture, as if seen from above.

I thought you said you were in the scene but now you are seeing it from above as a spectacle attached to scents?

How do you get into a scene? You approach it. Sometimes you enter into it and sometimes the camera just skips the transition or you get edited out. In this case, it was challenging to find the way in: no path or drive was apparent. The scene was plopped down into a nook of something vast, defined by a square stucco house nestled against one canyon wall, the one that seemed to evade precarious erosion. It was a house of contrasts, with shadowy tones drifting away from a stark white paint job, filtering through a disproportionately small verandah supported by natural wood beams. It didn't occur to me until later that engineering was involved in the illusion of stability of this one segment of the canyon wall, which was everywhere else stripped and gashed but also suspended in a pause such that the more violent effects of its erosion had been smoothed down a bit. There was something glamorous about the whole thing.

I wonder if one saw this with the naked eye it would be different than looking at it through the camera filter.

You know, I was thinking about that and I was thinking that I *was* seeing it with the naked eye, whatever that is, but then I thought I should be more honest: I really can't tell the difference between one and the other.

How did you get down into the scene when there was no path only dangerous canyon walls and harsh sun to boot?

There's a kind of delirium that sets in. Instead of staying curled up in a ball of weeping misery from recent deaths of friends, I crawled around on my hands and knees until I felt as strong as a mountain lion. Then I stood up on my two hind feet and sauntered around the canyon rim until I found a smooth and more gently sloping part of the wall just behind the stucco house. This is how the guests descended to the party; however, later I learned that there is a drive concealed largely by shrubby landscaping, so somebody has to explain all of this to you but in this case my friend, the host, wanted me to already know—by osmosis as if I were a native of canyon life when in fact I had grown up on the edge of an estuary answering the calls of seabirds.

Bearings

—things we can sense but not know.

Were you talking to me?

Sure.

You became audible and ended a sentence, but there was no subject or maybe *things* was the subject.

I've already forgotten. These local blueberries are what I'm focused on now.

What about the music?

I've been blocking out the magisterial sorrow of strings.

But not totally.

No, I'm listening with habituated ears. They take in effects and connect dynamics and passages without much demand on my attention otherwise.

Interesting, I was just trying to piece something together from before I was awake.

Help yourself to the berries.

Sure. I couldn't tell if I was being carried off to sea or being ushered forcefully back to shore. The water wasn't very deep, thank god or I might have woken up in a sweat.

You hadn't panicked yet?

No. The beauty of the shallow gray ocean, which obscured the shore and ignored the horizon was so mesmerizing it gave me a feeling of seduction and thrall, of juiced up mortality and hopeless abandon. Which I was resisting as well in order to keep my bearings.

This seems classic.

As in *the bottom of the sea is cruel?*

There's nothing new in the symbolism.

Yes, not even the dolphins I suppose.

They weren't porpoises?

Why would they be. I have been close to dolphins many times but never to my knowledge a porpoise. The dolphins were surfing on shore waves. They sprung into the picture as a signal that I would reach the beach. And I did, without clothes. When I turned around to wave good-bye, they were gone.

The dolphins or the clothes?

Both. Then my task was to keep my dignity in the nude. It was a mildly grimy beach, with lots of people in bright swim suits and dark tans and the smell of lotion and chips. Who wrote, *a picture is never true?*

I think we could use a vacation. Did you make it back?

You mean to the beginning of the dream? That was a prescient question. I did. That's how I got here eating your blueberries.

They are berries. Not *my* berries. It's like pin the tail on the donkey. It's not my tail or my donkey. It's *the* tail and *the* donkey.

Then there are donkey tales, which are also passed down through word-shattering belief systems generation to generation.

Let us genuflect to biblical abstraction.

Ha! That reminds me that you didn't have any clothes on.

You know that I just got dressed, if you can call this house dress dressed.

I mean when you were naked on the shore with the sticky scent of tanning lotion gluing up your adieus to surfing dolphins.

I had to walk some distance without clothes and I just imagined myself with a plump and buff suntanned butt that looked like it belonged in a bikini. This helped me through a few populous spots without commotion. And then I snatched a towel, wrapped it around me like I'd just gotten out of the shower. And that's how I got back to where I started.

To the predawn of history.

As I was saying, things we can sense but not know—

—*To Lyn Hejinian*

Sleep

I didn't dream and then I dreamed of abandonment entwined in thoughts of accusations regarding zealotry.

Does it matter that you didn't dream, or that you did dream?

Not dreaming is crashing into sleep without time holding you in its clutches.

Wait.

No, I can't. It's time to rev up some attention to detail. Like the sandwich I made you just before you were leaving for the getaway car. It had a thick crust.

I was getting away.

Yes, you spoke German and I didn't and the party you were joining spoke German, so I was left out even though I know some German words and they spoke English too.

Maybe your dream is telling you to learn German.

It seemed matter of life and death, but you were fighting me on that perspective tooth and nail.

I see you are channeling some colorful platitudes this morning.

I fear their disappearance from the general lingo and keep them close.

The general calls out to me—

The general calls my name, but my intense fighting spirit goes after something close, very close. Later the general is used as a reason to resist addressing the local situation. Nobody can keep anything in the proper category anymore.

Doesn't that suit you? You are handing me a sandwich for an outing that you mistake for insult and abandonment, then what did you do. I forget—

—I didn't beg, I decried.

—Who said, *sleep is the slave of dreams?*

Standpoints

You know what I'm up to *sometimes* regardless of certain casually oblivious ripostes that surge through each encounter or train of thought in which you figure below a surface easy enough to imagine while wondering how long it would take to search the quantity of flow-images among the arts and sciences without any interest in searching more color-coded undulations with clear layers lacking depiction or index of muck twigs thought detritus for instance the three millennial muses who snagged me in the surge of airport lobby traffic recently publicly holding forth with first a PowerPoint on one of their publication accomplishments, then on another's black and white form-fitted suit without comment on the eyeliner and mascara that punctuated their twinkly nod to a young person in the dress shop and finally on the third muse's need for confirmation that I knew something about literature something erudite that would *if it were worth their time to talk to me* inform their discussion of three terrible sounding films I have never heard of and that they described in detail and to which descriptions I lacked riposte and thus wishing you would wake me up with one of yours as there is a stultifying abundance to conjure though I remain speechless in the face of volcanic flows competing with conceptual charts of flow but the memory sensation of floating down a gently moving river which is still a commonly shared experience despite the waterway health alerts recalling to mind those instances in which traveling down a river on my back or belly without a lifejacket in peaceful ecstasy is punctured with the thought that I am moving at a faster pace without effort and the current is picking up speed such that it is a good idea despite the coolest of shields those crafted in light and water forged in realism and bliss coating me in dragonflies goose bumps foam and ear pressure enough to spin my orientation to the riverbank farther and farther out to mesmeric clouds as my butt *floams* over a sharp rock with the water bumbling under me increasingly whittled such that I must at this instant attempt against current to claw my way out of a sublime tincture turning mildly treacherous.

Allow me that the lenticular day has become a bloom of impending cluster bombs. There are letters to Congress to sign against their use. The narrative whitewater floods the banks with wishes to get it over with, end it all. Destroy the invader. Then a tank of self-annihilation rolls into the neighborhood and I see that this abstract desire to end fighting can kill that I love. How can we look at each other when this happens? Like you I find myself moving too fast in an element, without retort. Humor loses its grace. A heavy feeling that I am not sufficiently well informed. Even the fantasy of erudition evades me. De-escalation thinking remains a set of variable communal beliefs with my subjective sense flowing through punditry's smoke and mirrors. On the other side, where living happens, who wakes up each day to the betrayals war sets in motion. Is there an agreement to reach for?

You know *there is a lack of fit between the personal and the structural standpoints from what the world is imagined and acted on*¹ while individualized collective signing campaigns result in an onslaught of Evites to join groups whose members you don't know as a fantasy of living breathing crowds traipsing into the garden eating up all the zucchini tomatoes eggplant borage basil peppers radishes and playing until moonlight plumps a bed on the trampled ground we can hoe tomorrow in shirtsleeves and sweat disgruntled from the bruises left on shoulder blades when trying to make love on pounded tufted soil at which point the deluge relocates the zone to underwater phenomenon moving dirt to build new banks lined with backroom deals the *natural* way with our little snapshot of rebellion standing on the opposite shoreline with the de-escalation thinking it had seemed impossible to connect to during the Evite rampages and our personal electronics our computers and cellphones and watches and MIDIs and micro sound devices strung out in the currents whose established form and duration will be determined or better predicted once the bank room occupants arrive from their elsewhere havens though the torrential waters surging through the windows yet-to-be-installed may deter them until enforcements can determine what to do when these are still assessing the scraped land as geological time erupts more rapidly than the speed of making a plan.

Note

Written between Fall 2021 and Summer 2023 "Scales for the Living" is the third poem-prose-dialogue sequence of *Good Morning Trilogy*. Written through the pandemic period, the improvised conversations happen between two unnamed entities within their dwelling usually during the morning. These

¹ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022) 76.

dialogues can variously be thought of as representations of one person's interior thoughts or as literal exchanges. They are written in liminal states before I am fully awake, usually just after breakfast.

—Carla Harryman

About the Authors

The author of six books, **Karla Kelsey's** most recent poetry collection is *On Certainty* (Omnidawn, 2023). She is the editor of *Lost Writings: Two Novels by Mina Loy* (Yale University Press, 2024) and co-publishes SplitLevel Texts with Aaron McCollough.

Claire Marie Stancek is a writer, editor, and educator. Her poetry collections include *nyrd/bird* (Omnidawn, 2020), *Oil Spell* (Omnidawn, 2018), and *MOUTHS* (Noemi, 2017). With Daniel Benjamin, she co-edited *Active Aesthetics: Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Tuumba/Giramondo, 2016). With Lyn Hejinian and Jane Gregory, she is co-editor and co-founder of Nion Editions, a chapbook press. Claire Marie earned a B.A. from the University of Toronto and holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of California, Berkeley. She lives in Philadelphia.

Born in 1962, the Mexican poet **María Baranda** has been honored with prestigious literary awards in Mexico; Spain's Francisco de Quevedo Prize for Ibero-American Poetry; Canada's Sabines-Gatien Lapointe Prize; and the Ramón López Velarde International Poetry Prize, awarded for her career. Her many books of poetry include *Narrar, Dylan y las ballenas, Avido mundo, Ficticia* (translated into English by Joshua Edwards and published by Shearsman Books, 2010), *Teoría de las niñas*, and *The New World Written: Selected Poems* (edited by Paul Hoover and published by Yale University Press, 2024). *Atlántica y el Rústico*, translated by Lara Crystal-Ornelas, is forthcoming from SplitLevel Texts.

Lara Crystal-Ornelas was born in central New Jersey and raised between Jersey and Mexico City. She is a reproductive healthcare provider who writes and translates poetry. Selections of her translations were published in *The New World Written*. This is her first book of translations.

poupeh missaghi is a writer, translator, and editor. Her debut book *trans(re)lating house one* was published in 2020 and her second book *Sound Museum is* forthcoming in 2024 (Coffee House Press). Her most recent translation *In the Streets of Tebran*, a book of witness narrative about the current Woman Life Freedom uprising in Iran, was published by Bonnier Books, UK, in October 2023. She also has another novel in translation forthcoming in 2024. An assistant professor of literary arts and studies at the University of Denver and a faculty mentor at Pacific Northwest College of Art MFA, she is currently based in Denver, Colorado.

An avant-garde author, artist, and activist, **Anna Mendelssohn** was born in Northern England in 1948. From the 1980s she studied and resided in Cambridge, publishing 15 poetry collections and contributing to landmark anthologies of the British Poetry Revival. When Mendelssohn died in 2009, she left behind a vast paper archive, most of which is held at Special Collections, University of Sussex, UK. Mendelssohn's collected poems appeared in 2020, and an exhibition of her artwork ran from October 2023 to January 2024 at Whitechapel Gallery, London.

Sara Crangle is Professor of Modernism & the Avant-Garde at the University of Sussex. As editor, she has published *I'm Working Here: The Collected Poems of Anna Mendelssohn* (Shearsman 2020), *On Bathos* (with Peter Nicholls, Bloomsbury 2012), and *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy* (Dalkey Archive 2011). She has just completed a two-volume *Anatomy of Mina Loy* (Edinburgh UP 2024) and in 2023, co-curated *Anna Mendelssohn: Speak Poetess*, an exhibition of Mendelssohn's art with Whitechapel Gallery. Her poetry chapbook, *Press & Release*, is forthcoming with Dancing Girl Press.

Carla Harryman's recent publications include the poem-dialogue works *Cloud Cantata* (Pamenar, 2022) and *Good Morning* (PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, 2022); *A Voice to Perform: One Opera/Two Plays* (SplitLevel Text, 2020), and a two-volume bilingual edition of poetry and performance writing *Sue in Berlin* and *Sue á Berlin*, translated by Sabine Huynh (PURH, 2018). Her plays and text-based performance scores have been performed nationally and internationally.

Jon Raskin has been a member of Rova Saxophone Quartet for the last 42 years exploring the relationship of improvisation and composition, developing and honing the language of ensemble music and researching linguistic possibilities of the saxophone.