

Artificial Hearts

April 2014

The letters have been made to look analogue, autographed, not typed: the selfie-signature of the author. Black on pink. Barbie pink. The syntax coquettishly scribbled and doll-like: 'Is' dotted, innocently, like in a diary. Visceral, freehand, loose; the phonemes stand alone, apart; but are also a part of something: they belong to the title of a book, speaking for its insides.

If You're A Girl

Ann Rower

This inked expression is both a question and a seduction, curiously unfinished. If you're a girl, write yourself. Fill in the gaps. Sign it, own it, reveal it, expose it, perform it, fake it; put your name below it. Yours, AR.

To reframe and edit the self in fiction, to embody it with form itself, is a radical intervention: it redraws the lines of language that have previously silenced the raw stuff – women's voice, self and body – and sets it free. Biography need not be confined to mad-in-the-attic locket texts, but can in fact re-emerge in mediated fictions: whereby the body and self are transFORMed through language itself.

The heart-shaped locket cracks open and explodes (it is a brittle cheap thing): ink and blood spill out, unruly and unclean.

This is the self as syntax:

the writer's revenge.

The first person 'I' is at its centre, but do not trust it to be chaste. Or transparent. You cannot *see* through her. It is not baby pink; it is Barbie pink, as artificial as plastic.

I think of badgalriri clutching her iPhone at 45 degrees, mascara'd eyes directed to the screen, not so much looking as balancing; gold hoop earrings providing the symmetry, and cerise Chanel lipstick with tongue creeping out, providing the pink. The NIKE tick autographed across her cut-to-the-boob vintage t-shirt completes the fruity performance. An image to linger, defiantly post-script.

But what about the literary selfie? In Ann Rower's early 90s novel *If You're a Girl*, memoir is drawn from and then shot to pieces by the language used to describe it – forgetting the rules of the novel. Chapters read like self-contained gossip-columns; given titles like 'Amore' and 'Artificial Heart', these chattering stories feed themselves. Eat themselves. Only to be barfed back up again as fiction.

As Dodie Bellamy writes: 'Isn't all biography gossip? What is history but fossilised gossip?'

The urge to inscribe that gossip, to not let one self/sex story slip through the net, is inexorable, a bodily need: an insURGEence. For all this faux-vulnerability – the Barbie-pink jacket; the flirty glyphs; the porny subheaders – is just a ruse, the confessional a construct: what we are left with is Rower's writing: radical, powerful, physical writing. The language is tinted with a self-knowing smile.

Cerise lipstick, I'd guess.

I like the phrase *Artificial Hearts*: it seems to embody what these texts are about: naked, emotional, excessive: heartfelt but also ARTful. The raw life is translated into a fictional space, an authorial action resolutely entwined with letting the private, close-to-your-chest-stuff speak. Speak UP. Speak its hysterical madness in forms as convulsive as the body itself.

I'm going to scroll through these artificial hearts; I'm going to gorge on them, and revel in the guilt of doing so, making friends with other writers in the process. (Like when Bellamy wrote *Barf Manifesto*, 'To Eileen, Finally': a letter to her friend Eileen Myles's text 'Everyday Barf', and a text all of its own.)

These emotional art-hearts erupt and gush unpredictably; it's that jolt that breaks the patriarchal order. Jennifer Doyle sums it up pretty well in her recent art-critical work: 'The artists I work with turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work... this is where we come to know the contours of our selves, our bodies, our sense of soul... the artists that interest me turn to emotion, feelings and affect as a means not of narcissistic escape but of social engagement.'

The personal is not *only* political; it also constitutes a revolution in form: in the act of writing itself. *She*, the woman writer, need not hide behind what's raw: autobiography, when composed and reworked, is also an investment in the possibilities of language. Life-writing is radicalised with the wink of an eye.

As Bellamy manifests: 'Writing can and should offer an emotional engagement with materiality, that engagement can be highly mediated or direct, but that engagement begins a politics, a morality of writing.' Doyle speaks of image-makers and performance artists, Bellamy writes of text-makers: also performance artists.

Someone might say it's all 'too much', that *she's* 'too much'; way too carnal and dirty; but in those two words is a vital way to live and write. She's laying her cards on the table.

The Joker.

Naked and bare.

I'd heard the phrase 'transfiction', before I read it in the final few pages of *If You're a Girl*. I initially thought it was tonally off, a flat sort of portmanteau like po-mo: a reduction of all that is transgressive about this multi-genre work. But then I read those final few pages...

which pull the rug from under your feet.

Ann Rower does not write diaries, she writes fictions. Her friends and contemporaries of 1980s New York are turned into constructs: novelistic meat to be cut and carved. Templates to work with, and then forget. The book moves in and out of conscious verisimilitude: we will be reading one of Rower's diary entries, or one of the more dialogue-heavy prose pieces; before being slapped back into the textual reality and tickled pink. The book is really about the writing of the book, as she candidly states in the opening passage: 'It seems weird how all these embarrassing female type stories seemed to be popping into my mind, and then into my writing since V. was away: stories about sex, abuse, rape, abortion, marriage, divorce, infection, kids. I want to make a collection of them and call it *If You're A Girl*.'

The book brackets the bio that it contains, and in that cradling Rower collages life and fiction together: a radical move of aesthetic and social intent. She writes her own archive, uncensored and illegal: *seemingly* out of control. An assertion of the artificial mask of writing, it reframes the raw stuff in fractured forms, climaxing in the closing manifesto:

'Transfiction: it's the tension between two different drives, toward fidelity and freedom... In transfiction, you utilize this tension, you let your hands do what they want to on the keys... There is always something criminal about writing: it's like B&E – breaking and entering – what the British call smash and grab. Especially fiction: duping. There is something toxic and poisonous in lies: zap, you're transfixed. Can I help it if I wanna put the lie in Li(t)erature, as in Li(f)e? Go ahead Plato, make my day.'

Rower's novel of self-exposure is all performance, toxic and addictive. An *artificial heart*.

Stories about sex, abuse, rape, abortion, marriage, divorce, infection, kids. These raw-life realities are shaken by the very words to figure them in the diary entries of Cookie Mueller. The diary form is a private space of autobiographical confession and immediacy; an automated sort of writing, in which the body and language conspire, emitting transgressive content, edited within and around

the margins of transgressive forms. The ink and bloodstains aren't visible, but they're there: you can feel them, even if you can't *see* them.

Mueller writes in the first person of course, but not as a route to Romantic subjecthood; rather she writes the 'I' as a way of turning it on its head. It's hysterical rather than unified. And by translating life into text, she does something even more radical: she writes nakedly, sure, and exposes the dirt, but by shunting the private into the public, by rearranging confession in form, she rewrites her rawness as a performance in itself.

I think of Hannah Wilke as a shimmying mermaid, dancing to The Who's 'The Real Me'.

Mueller too, as author *and* character, disappears from sight.

Only to make 'herself' visible again. In text.

Reading Mueller's 150 pages of time-travelling, globe-crossing stories, it feels like a life compressed into 150; she's writing as if her life depended on it, in fact it probably did, but there isn't the time to write an epic when you're high on drugs. 1969 is 1970 before you know it.

(The Realist epic indebted to mythic narrative is a man's game anyway, as if the more pages you generate, the better endowed. As Zambreno notes in *Heroines*: 'Canon actually comes from a Greek word for 'measuring rod.'")

Cookie would die of AIDS in 1989. In the months leading up to her death, the illness robbed her voice: her only weapon. She couldn't talk or crack the jokes and mad metaphors that characterise her fiction. But a warped visibility of her remains: her voice is still audible – the textual remnants got published.

Mueller's diary fictions are framed by a writing position that is seemingly private. A space of corporeal impulse, the words pulse too: they are as rhythmic as the body itself. It's not only the diary writing that is left then, beyond her death, it is desire too – inscribed in this peripheral fictional document. In 'Go-Going – New York & Jersey – 1978-9', Mueller tracks Cookie's moonlighting job as a city lap dancer; she needed something flexible, something that would 'pay the bills while I was making a start at designing clothes, searching film parts and writing.' Candid expression, realised in terse sentences of bodily action – 'So I made myself look into the guy's eyes. It worked immediately. He started peeling off the ones and handing them to me' – is exploded by the writer's intervention: an animalistic simile, the surprising meeting of two words: 'I undulated all over the place, just like an eel in heat.' Figurative moments such as these send a charge through the syntax: ripe with feeling, but laced with artistry: another *artificial heart*.

The Cookie of this story was a secretary before she was a dancer, but she bemoaned the dire pay: 'and it took all day, five days a week.' Her typing skills would come in handy, but no longer would she have to follow the dictations: she could write her own letters, control her own fictions; have the freedom to write: 'When I got home, a bit shaken once again, everyone was

doing cocaine mixed with crystal methadrine. They got upset for a minute when I told them the rape story. Kirk asked me why I was always the one to have all the fun.’

Before the publication of her first novel *Berg*, the British novelist Ann Quin played daytime typist too: nighthawk writer. She earned a measly £7 a week, tapping the keys at the Royal College of Art painting school, where she worked as a secretary to Professor Carel Weight (the ‘e’ making him a ‘he’, unsurprisingly: it was 1959). 155 WPM; she was a talent. But like Cookie’s flirting payback, Ann too, did not merely type; she wrote, made life into words – before hanging up the telephone altogether, and moving to America.

The distance gave her anonymity. Hanging out with the poets and the hippies, she was able to reclaim the letters and archival documents of her secretarial past, and appropriate them within the space of fiction. The tissue-paper facts waywardly reordered. In the roaming road-trip-cum-moving-image novel *Tripticks* (1972), a whole section is dedicated to correspondence: Quin suggests the space of letter-writing to be inscribed with visceral fantasies, relayed in a form that is ephemeral, but embodied. The carnal act of writing is an immediate translation of the private-erotic into more public forms of communication. At least someone is going to see it.

The nameless narrator is silenced: the archive ‘belongs’ to him, but all of his letters have got lost in the mail; and so all that remains is a chORAL-correspondence of his x-wives’ replies. In a letter titled ‘Stereophonic Superman’, the narrator’s young plaything, nicknamed ‘Karate Kitten’, confesses to her junkie daydreaming, carving him as the object of her lexical gaze:

‘You’re so concerned with all that motivational soul-searching. One of the requirements to get where I’m at is that you have to dig fucking and doping. If you’ve got that going then you’re human, at least, and maybe you can learn to do something useful. It’s impossible to know what the effect of living with me will be... I like the new. I want you to have a toothpick in your ear and a purple boot on your right foot. But there you are in a gold metal joy suit, zapped into a wall socket and sexlessly a/ceeding and d/ceeding your **artificial heart**.’

(The bold is mine. Did AR read AQ?)

For Ann Quin, Finally...?)

In the act of inscription, of head-over-heels, uncensored bodily writing, KK transgresses her role as the silenced sex object: her schizo-syntax and wild semantics shout louder. The biographer would probably read the Kitten as an incarnation of Ann. During the time of writing (or perhaps it was written postscript), Quin was the lover of the Beat poet Robert Sward; she stayed with him *and* his wife Diane in New Mexico; here they took peyote together, and wrote through their trips. Diane prepared the dinner.

In one letter, Ann asks Robert if he will whip her three times a day.

But the life/fiction parallels can never be anything more than gossip. Instead, Quin exposes the naked act of confession to be not so much vulnerable or ‘real’, as vengeful. An edited return, a published heart. She writes over and through the personal, deFORMing and reFORMing it in the process.

Writing from a position of fake autobiography, in *I Love Dick*, Chris Kraus (writing as the ‘thin and nervous, bony’ ‘Chris’) opines: ‘I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world.’ By encasing her private ‘exhibits’ – the love-letters she sent to the anonymous ‘Dick’; the journals; the rampant faxes (it was published in 1997) – within the constructs of this novel, Kraus performs what Chris wants. And as much as the novel is about sex, it is also about reading and language *and* performance, and how this relates to sex: how it speaks for sex. Kraus reveals the act of writing itself to be relentless.

Infinite.

An insurgence.

As Chris confesses: ‘I can’t stop writing for a day – I’m doing it to save my life. These letter’re the first time I’ve ever tried to talk about ideas because I need to, not just to amuse and entertain.’ Chris’s love-sick weakness – her gushy exposure and wanton words – is an act of powerful deception, the ‘confessional’ a conceit: it is a game, a formal game, that empowers the female body to speak; enables the woman writer to write, write all over the male theorist’s ‘sexy cryptic silence.’

The personal form of the love letter is transFORMed by her authorial intent. ‘Dumb,’ she is not.

I think of how this faux-vulnerability, this appropriated girlishness of crazy linguistic games, mixed with babbling talk of love and gossip, is now being performed online: encapsulated on the Tumblr blog *ildselfies*. I meet Aliciadk, anonymous, but strangely visible, unshowered in days old sweater dirt, posing with her copy of *I Love Dick*. And Eg-Elska, an Icelandic Lit Student, is

With a famous male author, there is always the expectation, the desire even, that his words will endure beyond death – and not just the published, the unpublished too. The letters; journals; notes: the everyday stuff that might expose the big idea or the big love, retrospectively. *His* letters are archived, protected: ‘collected’.

But not Mina’s.

Bellamy’s performance of the ‘confessional’ takes a hammer to the male Archive, cracks its glass, and infects it with dirt and grime, sex and slander. Uncollected, all we are left with are ‘Letters’, a never-ending document of bodily language, like the image of Carolee Schneeman pulling a scroll from her vagina. The insides speaking, and making a mess. Her *toomuchness* is exposed in form, as much as content.

Resurrected from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mina is an epistolary invention: a secretary and typist, she binges on words, to throw them back up again in the wrong order in visceral barf-speech. Analogue anarchy.

In *Zeros and Ones*, Sadie Plant predicts the feminised technological fightback; the slide from analogue to digital, as performed by the woman typist/*Cyberflesh Girlmonster*. Linda Dement made a CD-ROM image of this techno-grotesque girl, and not one, but many: the cyberflesh girlmonster is a scattering of wasted body parts, scanned, dissected: emulated in disc form. Locked in LED, she still talks, *writes* even: ‘The next man to touch me dies’.

In the fragment ‘Automata’, Plant writes of this word-processing android:

‘She works automatically. Only has a half mind on the task. Transported by rhythm and monotony, she wanders off, drifts away, loses herself in the sequences she types, the numbers she records, the codes behind the keys, the figures she transcribes. Microprocessing. She hears, but she isn’t listening. She sees, but she doesn’t watch. Poised as an interface between man and world, she is also wired to a network of digital machines: typists connected to the QWERTY alphabets, bodies shaped by the motions of the keys, one hundred words a minute, viral speed.’

Hardware/software. The keys are a lexical battleground, a field of desire. The techno-typist is also a writer; listening to her body, distracted from the task at hand, she is a living incarnation of the rebel-secretaries that fill and fornicate in Quin, Mueller and Bellamy’s diary-fictions. Inasmuch as the digital space is non-linear, hybrid, a tangled web of texts and non-texts, it offers itself up as a space of inquiry, a space of writing. The blog post, the comment stream, the e-mail: these ephemeral literary objects are intangible but visible: simultaneously private and public. Rolling, scrolling, unfolding: they are texts of excess. The typist avenges history and literature by making limitless scrolls.

As textual spaces, they stage a writerly performance. Look at her go. Fingers hover above the keyboard, shake and quiver mid-flight, before banging the square-glyphs into submission. It’s a writing of verbs: desiring action. 1234. PAUSE. 5678910. PAUSE. Utterings come and go with

the body's everyday vibrations. Morphemes spiral out of control, uncensored, as semantic accidents make stains on the screen – marks of pleasure. This is language sped-up and automated, an embODYd writing, in which typing is done before thinking.

Back in the 1970s, women were the workers of Silicone Valley, assembling the circuits that became COMPUTERS, and flicking the switch to the transistors that required a touch to get them going. Nowadays, it is a masculine mecca. To write over and through its programs is a *coup d'etat* of sorts.

In an essay called 'Low Culture', Bellamy performs this naughtiness, realising the potential of the processor: 'Sitting at the computer, a body writes about sex. The keyboard and monitor are enormously erotic THE BEEPING MODEM, THE WORD MACHINE TALKING BACK more than once e-mail has gotten me in trouble.'

Published in 2011, a whole fourteen years after *Mina*, Bellamy's *The Buddhist* marks a move to a language computerised. Over the course of two years, prior to its publishing as a book, Bellamy wrote a blog called *Belladodie*. (Ciao, bella.) I'm pleased I'm reading it as a PDF, closer it is to the scrolling experience: screen shining back at me. As I skip and scan, stories of friendship and writing nestle up to stories of love, sex, illness, obsession and neuroses; as posts about her nameless buddhist lover become passages to talking about language and form and textual performance. In her post-script preface, Bellamy writes: 'We never set eyes on one another until yesterday, yet here we are, a middle-aged woman and a middle-aged Buddhist grunting together in the Kabuki Hotel. How did this happen? The Internet, of course.'

Writing on the net is a dirty game. In this nonfiction-novella, she even posts his damaging emails on Facebook for her writer-friends to 'Like', and inevitably recycle: the ultimate revenge: akin to taking his toothbrush to the toilet.

The blog post is ephemeral, a fleeting lexical object; inscribed alongside the body in flux, it evades our grasp. And there's freedom in that – in escape – as desire is transcribed faster than the clock.

Floating in the margins of literary language, like a notebook, diary or handwritten love-letter, the blog is a form of unpatrolled potential, where the woman writer can perform her rawness for all to see. Private morphs into public. She exposes her self, but plays tricks with it too, as she frolicks behind the veiled screen, and transforms the scribbles into writing. Can you really *see* The Real Me? she teases.

The *Dodie* of *Belladodie* sectionised her blog posts into chapters for the purpose of the book; with titles like 'My Person', 'Heart Publication', 'Oppositional Weakness' and 'Blob Love', Bellamy manages to encapsulate her project with these glossy, confessional conjunctives.

(Heart Publication and Artificial Heart: synonyms, perhaps?)

The titles play on her blog-game; they pretend to be girly, bare and open, like the Barbie-pink of

If You're A Girl. This confrontational ruse of fake exposure is both performed and self-reflexively talked about by Bellamy all throughout *The Buddhist*; she moves in and out of nakedness and knowingness (interlaced with photos of her cat), as she writes in the post 'Oppositional Weakness', uploaded on 10/11/10: 'This is what I was getting at in my post on public display and operatic suffering—an in-your-face owning of one's vulnerability and fucked-upness to the point of embarrassing and offending tight-asses is a powerful feminist strategy. Writing is tough work, I don't see how anyone can really write from a position of weakness. Sometimes I may start out in that position, but the act of commandeering words flips me into a position of power.' As she babbles her blob/blog love, a liquid mass of linguistic matter, Bellamy in turn reveals this to be a radical aesthetic position. An invasion of language.

The blog and the book represent an exploration of what happens when public display is rewritten and edited; how the frail subject is empowered by performance; how desire is transcribed in language, and how, as Dodie herself comments, she can push herself into 'ever uncomfortable spaces in writing.'

As Kate Zambreno has written of her blog *Frances Farmer is My Sister*, now the book *Heroines*: 'My blog at times feels like a toilet bowl, a confessional, a field hospital', which is pretty close to the apology she signs off her first post with: 'sorry for all the vomit for my very first post, but maybe that's a good thing.' (Thursday November 29, 2012: I archived it in my Documents.) Abject anxieties weigh the form down, but this self-reflexivity is also powerful and oppositional: the means to writing and restitching *Artificial Hearts*, and writing fuck-you to history.

Both Zambreno and Bellamy gutted their blogs and cannibalised their own texts, as they gradually mutated from 'cyber abstraction to book'. With publication, they have since 'suicided' their Internet posting-personas; archived their blogs into digital darkness.

Is this something to be sad about?

Who will rescue these texts?

Is that something we even want?

Their blogs might have disappeared to an archival-techno-nowhere, but the textual remnants remain, re-edited and reconfigured in both *Heroines* and *The Buddhist*. They are visible still, via their authorial impact. Audible too, their voice resounds, in the same way we could still hear Cookie, even when she couldn't talk.

Whether it's Cookie, Dodie or Kate, or the anonymous blogger re-pasting *their* aphorisms into infinite streams, writing *to* them because she wants to, and because she needs to, and because she can, we will see and hear them again, for what the selfie-fiction defends above all else is the right to WRITE.

Get to a keyboard and see what comes out; listen to your body; give a voice to the illegitimate.

That is the most vital thing.

At least someone is going to see it.

Alice Butler