

## To Ann, Finally...

### Barf, Body and Writing

September 2015

I could've been sick before this talk I was so nervous. It's been a while since I've spoken in public. I was worried if I was going to do it right. But of course I wrote this confession a whole three weeks before today, knowing that it's really just a performance: of writing, confession and correspondence. As Chris Kraus writes in the essay 'Continuity': 'Perhaps for "female writing" you could substitute the phrase "performative texts" – the text being like a live performance, not a text OF a performance, but the real thing. A text that is both live and lived.'<sup>1</sup> In this game of substitutes, swap vomit for writing. Ti Grace Atkinson talked about eating one's own kind, so I've ingested Chris, Dodie, Eileen and Ann; eaten their writing in an act of feminist cannibalism.

Their words will return, as I write letters 'to' them.

What does it mean to do it 'right' anyway?

*Dear Eileen, you did it wrong too, didn't you, when you wrote that political sestina and forgot what was fixed – the six word structure? I love how the scene of writing the bad sestina becomes the scene of writing for the essay we are reading, as if that badness is an extension of what has come before: limitless, excessive, writing feeding writing, as you perform the barf of the title.*

In the Eileen Myles anthology *The Importance of Being Iceland* (2009), the essay 'Everyday Barf' is located in the 'Talks' section, which makes sense given its oral musicality. Something that is both 'live' and 'lived'. It begins with the writing of a poem, and ends with the writing of a poem, self-referential bookends to a loose narrative of Eileen not doing enough to spend time with her 'mom'. But really it's all so intimately related: the personal, private work of the family, and the work of writing the text we are reading. It's processual. She's figuring it out as she goes, releasing the intimate into public language. As Marguerite Duras wrote in the verb-led book *Writing*: 'Write all the same, in spite of despair. No: with despair.'<sup>2</sup>

As an endnote to the sestina story, and a prelude to the vomit that will follow, Myles rallies in manifesto-fashion: 'It simply strikes me that form has a real honest engagement with content and therefore might even need to get a little sleazy with it suggesting it stop early or go too far.'<sup>3</sup> And so after Eileen dutifully performs the bad sestina at a New York reading, she takes a boat from the city to Provincetown where she has been housesitting all summer, a symbolic rural outpost for this allegory of marginal writing. When suddenly the boat gets sleazy; a storm brews up and the boat starts rocking waving and tipping (all sorts of verbs), resulting in violent retching from everyone on board. Myles writes: 'And the man next to me began puking. Urp, he went. Splatter, right into a paper bag. I think he was a fag. He was with his lover. Wha Wha Wha. He gagged.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Kraus, 'Continuity', *Feminaissance* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Eileen Myles, 'Everyday Barf' (2004) in *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Myles, 'Everyday Barf', p. 165.

Over and above the abject content, the form of the thing itself gets sleazy. As Kristeva wrote in *Powers of Horror*: ‘It is the Word that discloses the abject.’

Myles finds a lexical freedom in vomit, inscribing its oratory texture, as language becomes a space for the body to speak and write itself. Syntax becomes staggered. The word ‘barf’ is intermittently repeated throughout, a manifesto in a morpheme, breaking linearity. A ‘primal scene’, Myles calls it, erupting in primal poetry. She writes her mother a poem amidst the vomit, a libidinal force, and a libidinal form: ‘Dear Mom. Blah. My whole life shooting all over the windows of the boat. Dear Mom Blah. The stuff streaming word-by-word across the lines dripping down the page of my notebook.’<sup>5</sup> The words drip, seep and stick: the image of the notebook performs the look and feel of ‘Everyday Barf’. It is unclean in form, as well as content: a scrolling gush of fragmented word barf, as Myles generates language with language and with love.

As Dodie Bellamy, Eileen’s friend and a writer too, has written of the text’s uncontrollable composition, with its twisting umbilical final paragraph: “Everyday Barf says so much. It says too much. Meaning is so surplus it decimates form – or is it the other way round, its form is so vicious it beats the fucking pony of content to bits’.<sup>6</sup> Being too much: not just an exterior pose, but a toxic merging of private and public selves, a merging built through exposure, and through writing. In the words of Lauren Berlant: ‘There is nothing more public than privacy’.<sup>7</sup>

*Dear Dodie, I’m thinking about how Barf Manifesto in book form is dedicated ‘To Eileen, Finally’, and how the fight you guys had after you blocked Eileen’s toilet meant you removed her name from the thank you page in your own book of essays Academonia. Could writing be synonymous with friendship, as texts eat texts to make more text? We’re just sharing and making, right? My friend Jane posted me the second edition, unsigned by you sadly, for my last birthday. Written in pencil, in her usual gawky scrawl: ‘To Al, finally. J x’. I thought it was cute. It was also two weeks late.*

*Barf Manifesto* is made up of two papers, the first presented in 2007 and the second a year later: one thrown up by the other, after binging on ‘Everyday Barf’. The 2007 barf shifts from the text, which Bellamy sees as a ‘manifesto of complexity, ambiguity, indeterminacy’,<sup>8</sup> to the writing of Eileen’s 58<sup>th</sup> birthday party, and then on to the shit story of shame, as Bellamy performs the same sort of sweating syntax as Myles’s original text. A letter *to*. She writes:

‘... the next morning I have a bowel movement it won’t go down, the toilet water fills to the brim, precariously quivering, then Eileen’s handing me a plunger and telling me to pump and to keep pumping until all the water is gone, it’s first thing in the morning and I haven’t had coffee, and it’s hot as hell, I’m wearing this thin white organic cotton nightgown, with peach and white embroidered vines on it, and I’m sweating and as I

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<sup>5</sup> Myles, ‘Everyday Barf’, p. 166.

<sup>6</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Sex in Public’ (with Michael Warner) in Berlant (ed.), *Intimacy* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, p. 7.

pump my breasts are bobbing crazily for all the world to see, the water finally goes down and I flush and the toilet fills up again with my horrible poo, my shame...<sup>9</sup>

As Bellamy keeps returning to the body and its abject ‘thingness’, with that fluidity comes a language of bodily upheaval. Dodie’s confession keeps us on our toes with narrative suspense – will the horrible poo go down? – but over and above such anecdotal content, the climax of this barf points to a language of the body that quivers, pumps and bobs along with the fluxing of her ‘now’. It runs on relentless, before it flips out of nowhere, reminding us that this vulnerable, raw, excessive syntax is but a ruse, the confession a *form* and a conceit. What we are left with is Bellamy’s writing: radical, physical and brutal: as the final line recalls a birthday spectator shouting to Eileen while she pounded the birthday piñata: ‘Hit it in the head, in the head!’<sup>10</sup> Body over mind, after all.

The second Barf would come a year later, a reflection on her first, and another reframing of her friend Eileen’s. She tells us how they patched things up, post-poo, over vegetarian crepes and talked about their mothers. And as Bellamy confirms with candid openness ‘passion is underrated’<sup>11</sup> – a nod to these conversations, as well as the libidinal pump in which they are written – the text slowly unfolds, and exposes itself to be that which it pertains to be: a manifesto: a manifesto that beckons in the barf as a literary form. ‘The Barf is not so much anti-logocentric,’ Bellamy writes, as ‘outside the whole fucking system’. Within this sickened language of seizure, ‘hierarchies jumble in the thrill’, syntax gets unruly and language splits itself open: ‘The barf is messy, irregular, but you can feel in your guts that it’s going somewhere, you can’t stop it... you’ve just got to let it runs its course’.<sup>12</sup>

*Dear Dodie, I wonder if the barf is performance art, like when Carolee Schneeman pulled a scroll from her vagina and read from it. Running its course. That was private language, made public, too – that Interior Scroll. Could the letter or email be a type of barf? Is correspondence barf? Interiority, unscrolled...*

In Bellamy’s first novel *The Letters of Mina Harker*, the ‘secretarial adjunct’<sup>13</sup> of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is rewritten as the author’s grotesque avatar, as Mina writes gloopy epistles to Dodie’s friends and lovers. She wrestles diaristic expression from the protected male archive, and dirties it. The letter becomes a space for the barf to ‘happen’ in fiction, happen like happening: a constructed performance. Bellamy is basically Schneeman, writing letter-fictions akin to phonetic discharge. Within such eruptions, sex is figured as a typewritten exercise, and a warping of language, as seen in Mina’s confession to having sex with Sam D’Allesandro, Bellamy’s queer epistolary collaborator, on and amidst textual objects:

‘No matter how light I set the Xerox machine, on KK’s copy Sam’s typewriting showed through. Then we had sex on top of the letter (not on purpose, it was just there) I climbed on my hands and knees and he fucked me from behind which made me think:

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<sup>9</sup> Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Bellamy, *Barf Manifesto*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 9.

‘bow wow’ but I didn’t say it even though it would have been fun because – have you noticed this – people who are about to come have a lousy sense of *humour* the air gushed from his lungs he dropped forward, I lay down on my stomach careful to keep him inside he nibbled on my right shoulder and I wagged my ass like a tail.<sup>14</sup>

Bellamy, masquerading as Mina, injects the bodily, the biographical, the slime and the sleaze into the space of fiction. Mina pounds the keys as a matter of life or death, but more likely desire, instigating a chattering language of sex, gossip, autobiographical vignettes, theoretical musings and plagiarized paragraphs, where the edges get fuzzy. Barf. The collaged mix-up, which engorges language, then annexes the printed page, making a mess with orgasmic capitals, uncensored italics and unbroken syntax. As Bellamy writes of the chaos Desire is having on Mina’s life and writing:

‘Desire walks into her life with gnarled hair and the blue eyes of a wolf. HOW DOES IT FEEL ABOUT HER? She tries to act noncommittal but finds herself unwinding like a spool, her coolness an awkward composure. Desire... *Its terrible secret slips her in two* she grows monstrous, infected, her head full of imaginary conversations that oscillate from shockingly aggressive to coy *the sacrificial eroticism of allowing herself to be known* Desire listens, Its whirlpool ears sucking in details *she cannot resist cannot withhold* she reveals things too early, slips in the vulnerable the unwise the embarrassing the scandalous’.<sup>15</sup>

To allow herself to be known, to reveal things too early: Mina embodies the *too muchness* of Everyday Barf. This abject monstrous half-thing – *Mina Harker Queen of the Dictaphone and Typewriter* – is personified by speech; she is the unedited writer, reveling in the freedom of the uncollected. Mina’s licentious scenarios have been arranged into a series of writings as ‘deformed and twisted as its content’<sup>16</sup>: the dark hidden corners of language. Mina calls this recess her ‘secret place’,<sup>17</sup> but it’s Dodie’s really. An epistolary urge that writes the sexual content confessed by Mina is an authorial performance of visceral desire in writing, full of rhythm, movement and angles. It is a splurting, a gushing, an emission, a *barf*, sounded out by language itself. The private ephemera of emotional, raw, messy life-writing is appropriated as a radical tactic of feminist performance and fiction, blurring the boundaries between what is real and what is visible, what is confession and what is construct. As Bellamy writes of the project in the essay ‘The Cheese Stands Alone’: ‘In my gusto for exploding the boundaries between my writing and my lived experience, I was determined to push the personal into ever more embarrassing realms’.<sup>18</sup> There’s freedom in that in-between state: in-between as in abject, and abject as in language.

Uprooting the previously stable foundations of the fictive ignites horror and discomfort, as Dodie states in her book of blog posts *the buddhist*:

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<sup>14</sup> Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Dodie Bellamy, ‘The Cheese Stands Alone’ in *Academonia* (San Francisco: Krupskaya, 2006), p. 112.

‘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 really 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... Like Kathy Acker, I long to quiver and terrify in the same gasp’.<sup>19</sup>

Bellamy’s journaled unmediated words may start off within the private realm of girlish confession, but with the edit and the artifice comes an owning of the material, a commandeering of words, a cannibalization of form, and a radical assertion of female subjectivity, and the position of the female writer. Dodie confesses to loving the ‘silly second class flutterings’<sup>20</sup> of the Mad Men secretaries, but she herself is not only a typist: she’s writing through the epistolary as an exploration of life as linguistic material. She’s literally making forms *out* of the abject, as she indexes her own archive against the alphabetical rules.

*Dear Ann, you were the danger secretary too. You put the secret in secretary. I think of you clocking off from your typist job at the Royal College of Art, and catching the bus to your Notting Hill bedsit, where you would tap away at the manuscript of your first novel. It was named after that painter you had a crush on: Adrian BERG.*

*Dodie longs to write like Kathy Acker, but I wonder if Kathy Acker longed to write like you.*

*I think of the final lines of Tripticks, which I’m sure you wrote not knowing it’d be your last: ‘Sitting there brooding, I discovered a breathing space, but a space before the scream inside me was working itself loose. A scream that came from a long series of emotional changes. Fear for safety and sanity, helplessness, frustration, and a desperate need to break out into a stream of verbal images. ... I opened my mouth, but no words. Only the words of others I saw, like ads, texts, psalms, from those who had attempted to persuade me into their systems.’<sup>21</sup> You talk of the scream, but you wrote the scream too. Raw. Convulsive. The spit of the affect. It was Barf.*

Like Bellamy’s texts of performed transcription, Quin’s novels are also cluttered with writers. The threesome of her second novel *Three* (1966) keep their own diaries, and Quin rubs her fingers in them, writing the forbidden of the personal in fiction. A young girl called S has gone missing, presumably after submitting to the coast’s fatal tides; she’s been lodging with Ruth and her husband Leon at their holiday home, and as they feel the absence of S, the couple envelop themselves in their own domestic tasks – including writing. They distract themselves with everyday stuffs, which mainly comprise objects of speech and language, like diaries, dictaphones and ledgers. Ruth and Leon are ‘R’ and ‘L’, according to ‘S’, stiff phonetic beings, fully embedded within the self-referential boundaries of fiction. And in the case of S, the written journals and tape recordings, as material semantic objects, replace her corporeal presence in the house: it is her language that is bodily, as in the case of this confessional enumeration: a barf of morphemic excess:

#### Fertility clinics

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<sup>19</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *The Buddhist* (Allone Co. Editions), p. 35.

Bellamy, *The Buddhist*, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ann Quin, *Tripticks* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 2009), pp. 191-192.

Injections  
pills  
specialists  
psychiatrists  
analysts  
masseurs  
osteopaths  
palmists  
clairvoyants<sup>22</sup>

On the page the list looks like a scroll, drawn out from the insides of the body and of language. It's Carolee Schneeman again, the intimate document. The biographer would probably look to read 'S' as an incarnation of the authorial Ann. She was the other woman in a couple of relationships, as when she stayed with the poet Robert Sward and his wife Diane in New Mexico in the late 1960s. In one letter to Bob, Ann demanded a merging of their sexual and creative drives: he must both whip her 3 times a day AND give her the best all view work room. The private sketch bleeds into the public fictional space, as the correspondence shadows a journal entry from the male writer in *Passages*, the third novel of four: '... I handled the whip, her body as though they were the most natural things in the world, something I had always done. Perhaps in retrospect the most exciting part of all this was not so much my whipping the girl, but seeing her so abandoned, submissive and obviously getting more and more excited...' <sup>23</sup> This is not simply some abject biographical confession or a transcription of real life. It's a REwriting of the raw stuff in fractured forms. She's exposing the private, but as 'I' morphs into 'she' into 'her', with no clear markings of where the surround of subjectivity might lie, the voice of Ann coalesces with the artificial reality. She emerges; then fades within the textual object.

Quin is writing the beginnings of the barf: not only does she translate life into text, a simple equals equation; she performs the private, raw, naked body in a polymorphous language of fractured linguistic material. It is the self as syntax, a writer's revenge. The biography is left behind as Quin writes a transgressive fiction, or rather a transfiction, as proposed by Ann Rower in the final few pages of the 1990 novella *If You're a Girl*:

'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 on the keys... There is always something criminal about writing... Especially fiction: duping. There is something toxic and poisonous in lies: zap, you're transfixed. Can I help it if I put the lie in Li(t)erature, as in Li(f)e? Go ahead Plato, make my day'.<sup>24</sup>

*If You're a Girl* is a fiction, posing as a diary. *Tripticks* is a document as intimate as it is public, too. Comprising a verbal stream of moving images, this road trip novel represents the outcome of the New Mexico drugs she took with Sward. Sex is written as a staggered montage of images, by turns elemental, architectural and chromatic: 'A fluid dance, and all our limbs flowing into, out,

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<sup>22</sup> Ann Quin, *Three* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Quin, *Passages* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1969), p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Rower, *If You're a Girl* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 270.

through, until I had no idea whose hands, breast, leg I touched, or was touched by,<sup>25</sup> which calls to mind Mina Harker's threesome confession: *'three way threesome third sex our three irresolvable bodies strapped together whose cock whose cunt who's writing whose'*.<sup>26</sup> Sexspace is figured as a space of writing, wholly generative, as Quin continues: "Trips not on established trails. A series of spectacular switch-backs. Domes and carvings, arches and flying buttresses. Subterranean desert life. I stretched out along a floor of inland seas. As I sat there in the half dark their bodies became strangely natural rock sculptures of animals, miniature cities, cathedrals and temples. A riot of pink, red and orange, white grey and cream."<sup>27</sup> Here the narrative event disintegrates, as the act of writing strays language away from the descriptive reality: what we are left with is a corporeal reality, a sensual affect, and a series of visions, whereby the passage's broken phrasing suggests a fractured bodily experience.

It is in the correspondence section of the novel where the female characters, the Karate Kitten other woman and the ex-wife, have their revenge on the psychopathic narrator – who, incidentally, uses letters like 'scatter-shit'<sup>28</sup>. But not the female writer, as they claim back their own archive within the space of fiction. The Karate Kitten confesses to her fantasies – 'one of the requirements to get where I am is that you have to dig fucking and doping... I like the new. I want you to have a toothpick in your ear and a purple boot on your right foot'<sup>29</sup> – while the ex wife warns/writes of his downfall: 'Remember this: watch out, on your way home. I'll be there, in the dark street, waiting for you with a heavy hot splicer in my hand'.<sup>30</sup> In the act of inscription, they transgress their roles as silenced sex objects: within the uncensored margins of the letter, their wild bodily speech screams louder. Quin exposes the naked act of confession to be not so much vulnerable, as vengeful, an edited return: published, performed and constructed.

Like Eileen and Dodie and Kathy and Ann Rower before her, she writes over and *through* the personal, deforming it with form, so that what we have left is a flow, a running course, a barf of body and words. I'm nearly done with writing to them, but I just thought I'd end with the writer I started with. This is Chris Kraus, writing a recent conversation she had with a friend: "We're all the same, don't you think?" the artist Martha Rosler remarked. We were talking about Acker, whom she'd known well in San Diego during the early 1970s. "Of course we're competitive. But that also means we can identify with her. I could've been Kathy; Kathy could've been me. I don't know. I could've been you; you could've been me. We all could've been Eleanor Antin. It's all the same. And by that I don't mean we're not who we are. But you know what I mean."

You, me, we, I. Us.

This is to Ann, Finally.

*Alice Butler*

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<sup>25</sup> Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> Quin, *Tripticks*, p. 114.