

e-ISSUE ZERO

January 2008

essays into essays



Introduction

If you are reading this, I thank you for taking this first important step. You have received this because you are on a mailing list or a member of a listserv that I have targeted, one that identifies you as being part of an MFA program. I have created, developed – and will moderate, curate – this space so that we, MFAers, may contribute to the discourse that surrounds us, the discourse on writing and poetics.

By no means do I wish to be exclusive; rather I wish to start modestly. I have no desire to compete with John D'Agata or Fence magazine, for example, both of whom I have great admiration for. Instead I have named this space agora so that we, students of writing, practicing writers, readers

of books, self-styled critics, reviewers and editors – in short all the roles we play – can participate in the discourse that consumes us: how we write. What it means to me, what it means to you, what it means to us to be a writer.

This first e-issue contains a sampling of what I believe we commonly hold back from each other, a selection of prose that models our collective attempt to make sense of our lives as writers, where we openly struggle with lines of investigation that inform our writing, and ultimately, ourselves as writers. At times the form of our struggle is rather ordinary; one might make this observation about Michael D'Alessandro's essay. Read closely, this notion of prophetic vision, see

how it speaks to us, here, today, at the beginning of the 21st century just as much as it did in the mid-20th century.

Julie Crea and Melissa Kozakiewicz provide, let's say, a more personal glimpse into the struggle. How do we reconcile our lives as writers with our other responsibilities; what lines do we draw in the sand, and where are they. Melanie Miller represents the multi-facet-ness of the lyrical I in the form of a marvelous flowchart, and I find myself relating this back to the notion of prophetic vision. In speaking to ourselves, we are speaking to each other.

None of this is done for credit, for a grade, for approval or approbation. We, you and I, do this because we cannot do otherwise. And I invite

you to join me. There is no cover charge, no agenda, no program. I hope there is one thing in these virtual pages that rubs you the right way – or the wrong way. Send me something. Write a letter in response. The discourse is going on all around us; let's participate in it on our own terms. I am ready, ladies and gentlemen, to open this can of worms. Let us begin.

kaen joyler

December 2007

no previous gun experience

Melissa Kozakiewicz



they would not let me shoot a handgun like a glock but they did let me shoot a rifle after i took the safety class and signed a paper that said i was not mentally ill or dishonorably discharged from the military or a domestic abuser or a stalker or a weed smoker or any other narcotic or controlled substance user. i signed it but nobody checked it. they did not ask for my identification card or even my credit card. they made me sign a paper that said i would not sue them if i died at the shooting range because someone shot me or because i shot myself. my family would not be allowed to sue them either once i signed the paper.

then they gave me a gun. it was a long gun it was at least three feet long. i didn't want to touch it but i had to touch it if i was going to shoot

said gun so i touched at it when the instructor told me to. he called me honey but he was nice and trying to be friendly so i did not mind much. i held up the gun the way he showed me and i looked through the back focus and i made sure to get the brass bead in the cup. with a rifle you have to close your left eye if you are right handed and want to aim properly at the target.

always hold the rifle down range. do not point it at the instructor or anyone else for that matter. it is dangerous and also an insult. aim at the pink dot on the wall. got it? concentrate on the brass bead and slowly pull the trigger. if you pull it too hard you will make the gun jump and then you won't hit the trigger but you might instead hit the ceiling or the wall or something

else that you are not supposed to be hitting when you shoot your gun.

after all that practice me and the two irish tourists in my gun safety class went out to sit at the table and the instructor, ellis, like ellis island, gave us five magazines which hold ten bullets each. we got fifty bullets for fifty dollars. actually fifty four dollars and nineteen cents to be precise because they have to add taxes to our shooting experience. i found it very poetic that we got fifty bullets since i was there to learn about the fifty bullets that killed mister sean bell. i did not explain that to my classmates or to the instructor but i was wondering about the ways in which god works when i found out we got fifty bullets exactly.

we loaded our magazines which took a bit

of time and was not nearly as glamorous as it seems to be in the movies. i asked ellis if every gun has to be loaded like this and he showed me his gun which was much smaller than my long gun. his magazine had very fat bullets in it and it loaded the long way not in a circular fashion like mine. it was not actually mine but i felt like it was at this point since ellis kept talking about bring your gun or point your gun or make sure the safety is on your gun. his gun could surely kill somebody with its fat bullets but i was not sure if my gun could or not.

before i went to the gun shooting place my roommate told me not to go because i might like shooting guns and he was pretty sure i did not want to like shooting guns so therefore i should

not go. but i had to go. how could i write about cops shooting guns at a man on his wedding day without knowing how it feels to shoot a gun at a piece of paper?

i did like shooting the gun.

i shot a .22 caliber rifle at a piece of paper that was 21 feet away which is not very far at all. i hit the round bull's eye almost every time. i wanted to focus my thoughts on what it would feel like to point the gun at a person but i just kept thinking about hitting the bull's eye and 48 bullets hit it. only two bullets did not but they hit very close to the bull's eye so i did not consider them to be bad shots. i was surprised how simple it is to hit the

bull's eye when you just close your left eye and keep the brass ball in the cup.

were the cops more than 21 feet away from mister sean bell? how come they had to shoot their glocks which are presumably easier to shoot than my long and heavy gun fifty times in order to accomplish whatever it was that they were trying to accomplish? what were they trying to accomplish? surely these police this group of new york's finest must have more practice at shooting than me who is just a poet with no previous gun experience. they should have excellent aim. i can not understand why they shot their glocks fifty times.

after i shot my long gun fifty times i was quite tired. actually i was quite tired after 31

bullets. i did not even want to finish the fifty bullets but i felt like i should since i had to pay for them whether i shot them or not besides i would feel a bit silly returning the bullets to ellis.

yesterday i lost my gun virginity. i have to admit that i do not feel the same sort of shame i felt when i lost my sex virginity. i do not feel shame at all. my arms hurt a little. after you shoot a person and they die do you lose your murder virginity?

**Groaning Gestalt:
In Search Of Jack Kerouac's Prophetic Message
[part 3]**

Michael D' Alessandro



Amid clouds "huge and massed above the fiery golden desert of eveningfall [...] through halos and rolls and gold folds" God appears in a vision, saying, "Go thou across the ground; go moan for man." Solemnly, Jack Kerouac read these lines to 1959 America on Steve Allen's *Plymouth Show*, transforming that god-cloud into Pooh Bear for an angst-swelled society to digest and ponder. Expectant America wanted a hoodlum king to descend upon the establishment with what might have been a canned message of revolution.

The wild popularity of *On the Road* quelled the pacifistic, syntagmatic visions of this "later phases of our lives"; a new American counter-menace was thwarted by the King of the Beats. In the end, Dean Moriarty walks off alone, while Sal

Paradise rides off in a Cadillac with friends. This image of Beat Dean “ragged in a motheaten overcoat,” romanticizes the solitary purity of wandering for Kerouac, Bard of the Road, groaning for the absolute truth of existence, moaning for Dean, moaning for man.

One hundred years before, Walt Whitman trudged through the same New York boroughs Dean would. In *Song of the Open Road*, the spirit of journeying forth, of leaving home and work undone, is freshly heard:

Done with indoor complaints, libraries,
querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.
The earth, that is sufficient.
[..]
Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten,
and the book on the shelf unopen'd!

Whitman sang to the host of people he would accept along the road:

The black with his woolly head, the felon, the
diseas'd, the illiterate person, are
not denied;
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the
beggar's tramp, the drunkard's
stagger, the laughing party of
mechanics,
The escaped youth, the rich person's
carriage, the fop, the eloping couple,
The early market-man, the hearse, the
moving of furniture into the town, the
return back from the town,
They pass—† also pass—anything
passes—none can be interdicted;
None but are accepted—none but are dear
to me.

Whitman portrayed a road less traveled where everything is accepted and taken in, an open road

ordained with the true wisdom one seeks.

Kerouac revisioned this poem in Dean Moriarty's comings and goings with Sal Paradise. They became Whitman's "swift and majestic" companions of travel. Into the hero of Dean Moriarty, Kerouac weaves a thematic strand which Dean expounds upon erratically throughout: "IT" and "TIME", joyous overpourings of understanding about the true meaning of things, a prophetic message in pregnant moments of truth.

In the back seat of the travel-bureau car, Dean summarizes his absolute divine truth for Sal: "... the point being that we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know that everything is really FINE." Just as Dean says this, he passes IT. That moment slips into the next with the stark

realization of knowing how to harness, juggle and toss IT, and not bereave TIME by dwelling on what IT is.

Whitman similarly regarded time and the moment in his road ode:

Allons! to that which is endless as it was
beginingless,
To undergo much, tramps of days, rests of
nights ...
Again to merge them in the start of superior
journeys,
To see nothing anywhere but what you may
reach it and pass it,
To conceive no time, however distant, but
what you may reach it and pass it.

Dean describes an alto man who "had IT ... everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He's filling

empty space with the substance of our lives." This moment freezes time, and everyone in the room is interdependent and communicative.

There is a prophetic tone to the monologues of the Whitmanesque hero, Dean, in *On the Road*. Through this voice, Kerouac wanted to tell the world what he knew about time and how meaningless pursuits of the clock were to mid-20th century America. He wanted to report his findings on the condition of man, from his own vision, that "nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old."

These lines appear on the last page of *On the Road*, and were part of the text Kerouac read on Steve Allen's show. They were groans for his

unlikely hero, for his soul-tossed mind of many ventures and returns set forth from his visions, to impart a truth-born knowledge; not knowing what will happen to anyone except the ultimate surrender to death. Kerouac ran headlong into this shadowy realization after uttering those prophetic lines in a pastel television studio in 1959.

Kerouac's method of writing – where he gave his consciousness free rein to sketch the details of what he saw – allowed his brain-intellect and soul-being to communicate through his hand to produce a gestalt picture, unedited, instinctive and trusted. He called his method "Spontaneous Prose", and often these unrevised thoughts contained the germ of his prophetic message and unique vision. "Old Spontaneous Me" was how Kerouac referred

to himself in a chapter of *Visions of Cody* called "I CAN GOOF if I want to".

A staggering amount of work survives as a result of Kerouac knowing the prophetic meanings he found in life and death must be recorded and preserved. Throughout, he reported truth: what he saw, what he knew to be his ultimate visions. His visions charged him with the task of chronicler, and he bore that task despite a burdensome morbidity and propensity to drink in its shadow. Jack Kerouac's prophetic message can be found breathing among every reader who can relate to the ecstasies, the visions, the sufferings and the drive to tell about it.

Waffles

Julie Crea



We're late. Again. It's morning and we're not morning people here.

"You've got five minutes," I tell him. "Eat your cheerios, they're on the table." He's crouched on the carpet in his Batman underwear, whimpering. "I want waffles," he screams at me. His head's tucked between his knees – like a tidy little package corded with arms. "This is gonna end bad. Is that what you want?" I'm starting to sweat, my makeup's running.

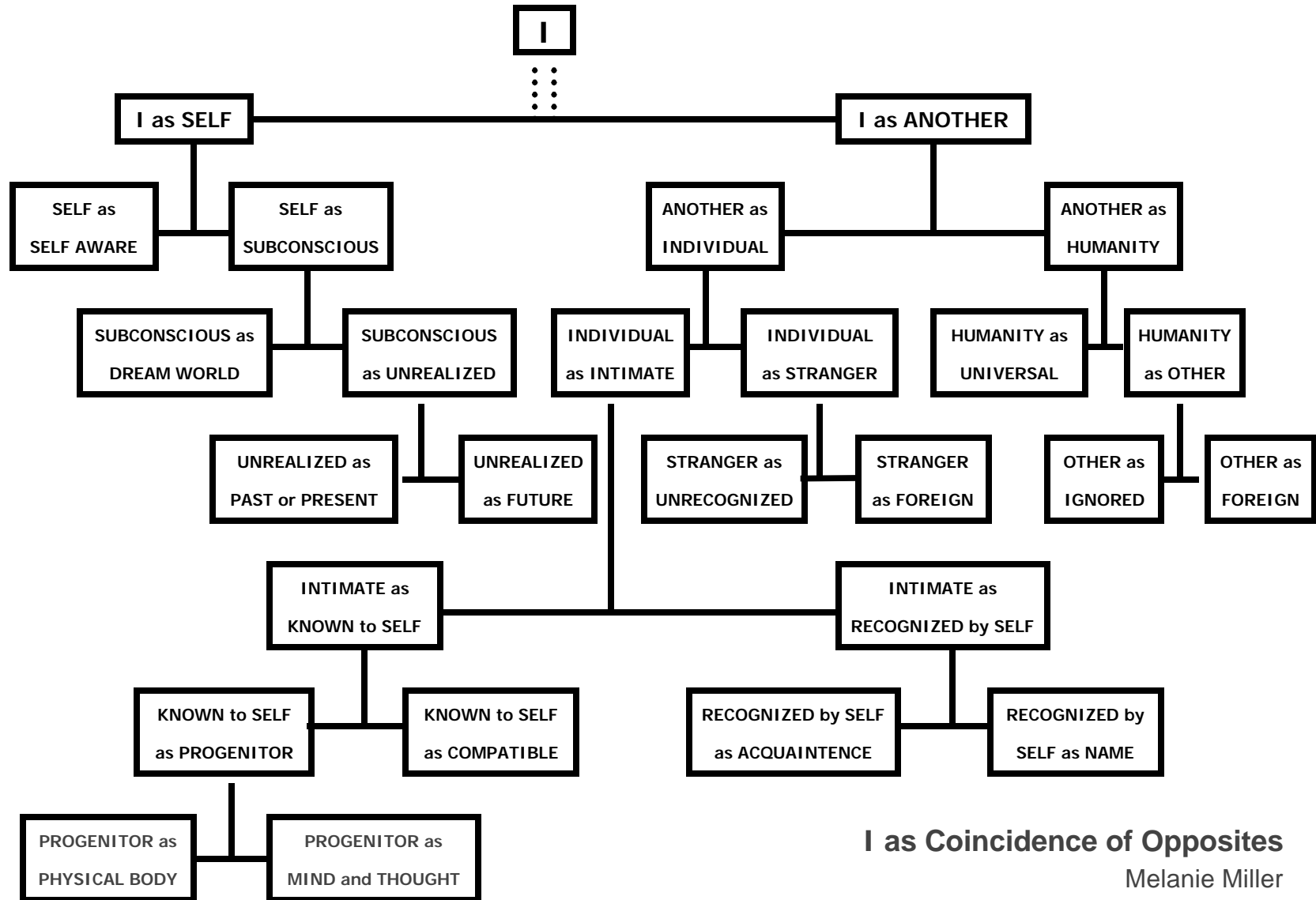
He cries then, a little at first, but he's trying hard not to. I know it's the end. It's like that slow motion effect when you're about to wreck your car. You see it coming and there's nothing you can do to stop it. I realize I'm holding my breath. Sure enough he's sobbing. I want to slap him. Time

careens forward into an end-over-end, rubber-burning skid.

Instead, I grab his pants and try to stick his legs in. It's like dressing a giant guinea pig. I'm lucky he's not a biter. He goes limp with the shirt and tries the jump-and-run tactic with the shoes. I snatch-and-drag him off the stairs. It takes a few tries to get the shoe on his foot. He's trying to hop away on the other leg. My hair's in my face, but I don't let go. I get the other shoe on.

I push him out the door, to the car, and toss him in. Slam it shut. It's suddenly quiet. My ears are ringing. I feel sweat running down my back. I have to change my sweater. And we're late. I look through the back seat window. He's crying at me. His eyes are angry, his hair matted down, mouth

moving. Over and over in slow motion his tiny wet lips form the word:



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