

# ON BEV DAHLEN

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“What’s the difference,” David Shapiro famously asks, “between a cloud and a spanked boy.” Hmm. So what’s the difference between Leslie Scalapino and Beverly Dahlen? Well, they both live in the Bay Area, for one thing. But more to the point, at least in the 1970s & 80s, they were arguably working on, or out of, the same difference, one which Wittgenstein might have enjoyed: what does it feel like to try to articulate the shape of a structure from inside that structure, especially when it’s the big sort of structure that – hello Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Lacan – gives us language and kinship exchange and a self of whom it can be said, there where it was it is my duty that I shall come to being (that’s Lacan twisting the hell out of Freud’s “where id was, there shall ego be”)? The other half of that same difference being: so how does the speaking subject that’s brought into being and stained (scarred) by that structuration also stain it, or wander around Certeau-like among its furtive, or awkward, or suddenly sexy or beautiful by-ways? And the difference would be, maybe, that while they both end up in these places, Bev lets her poetry wander there a little more often, and seems a little more bemused, though no less startled, when wandering, or wandering memory, wafts her there – the stakes and the terrain can feel dauntingly large in the work of both poets, but in Bev’s work the landscape, and the wanderer, feel a little less tensed, and warmer. So the work, while difficult, is also inviting.

So now, thanks Emily, what about internal difference, where the meanings are? (I mean in Bev’s work, work to work.) This is probably wrong, but re-reading *A Reading 1-7* it feels like, let’s say, the big structure, call it the name of the father, gets there before the poet gets started, and the poet knows it: “before that and before that. everything in a line. where it was broken into, the house. not the body [where the dreamer says “that’s not my mother,” says Freud, read “that’s my mother”] but still I could not see that it didn’t have a roof. then there was something to cry about.” So that the work wanders in that prolepsis, briefly but repeatedly, into what suddenly feels like the gift of contingency, the grain of some particular, even if rendered abstractly:

remember by forgetting. the grace of attention. that attentiveness to the materials, that argument, he said, with the material, and that would be that place where it was not all smoothed out, over. that would be its meaning. . . . over and out over and out. the crackling of voices, the wisp of dogs, barking. never done. an opening into it. a round forest magnified. we came there. I forgot it immediately. I said I want to drop this, I want to lay this down, not carry it, are you still carrying that stone? . . . the *I Ching* reminds us constantly no blame. no blame is nothing settles.

Whereas the later-written *Eighteen Sonnets* seem to *begin*, all wide-eyed, wandering through the midst of the merely contingent. Here’s a terrific one:

a man called the police late one night because he was worried about his downstairs neighbor whose shower he had heard running for hours having become gradually aware of the persistent sound of streaming water as he sat in his chair reading and finally rising and walking to the open window in his own bathroom he stood listening and

then he called into the airshaft the question *hello?* and his neighbor's name which he knew then waited and listened and questioned again now checking his watch now staring into the dark air outside the window hearing the spray of the water below and no other sound now though he felt himself straining then abruptly he rushed out to the phone

(Sonnet 10)

It's just what happens to be happening, right? Right. Which might always be something else. But there's the usually unobtrusive but cannily cumulative registration of all those fourteen line units, set box-like like prose, or like boxes, and sometimes the goofy/awkward breaking of a word at line-end (no hyphen) just where it happens to thunk against the box's right hand wall. So gradually one thinks to ask: what shapes this world? What is it that makes it be what it is, whereas maybe something else might have made it be what it's not. Why is late modernity late modernity, why is America America? Without ever saying so. Or: why is the world what it is, instead of something else? So that the political question is also, oddly, what we might call somewhat awkwardly the religious one. As one zen koan has it, "what is this?" To which the right answer, it turns out, is just to fall down in praise and blessing. Which these poems do.