

IN PROGRESS FOR HOA NGUYEN

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It's not uncommon to gauge one's self by way of others. Those "others," of course, are possessed too of their own imagination. The heart and mind are populated by figures through which the imagination produces life (rather than reality, though the Real interjects itself as the black matter on which the imagination struggles into its own existence). I'm sure Levinas, or Lacan, or some other theory heavyweight could put this into terms more commonly known, though I understand the gauge of self through Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, most clearly. This is a very stupid way to begin trying to say something about someone I love.

The first time I saw Hoa Nguyen she was wearing black motorcycle boots, I believe, and a short skirt. I was married. And that ended. I moved with Hoa to Texas only two years later.

A little while ago I found a picture of us taken in San Francisco, at Anselm Berrigan's apartment, on Page Street in the Lower Haight, ca. 1995. For more than a decade I've lived with her and her work.

I remember reading her poems in a coffee shop on Valencia Street in the Mission. I remember editing a student magazine with her. I remember sitting with her in a garden overlooking the City. I remember looking across a room at her in Tom Clark's seminar on Charles Olson. I remember moving into her place on Folsom Street and drinking coffee and reading the *Sunday Times* on a deck overlooking a bank of bright bougainvillea. I remember stopping in Luna, New Mexico, during a lunar eclipse on our drive from California to Texas. I remember her serving cocktails at Katz's. I remember setting type to her book *Dark*. I remember long arguments about how to edit magazines. I remember when she first proposed we publish our own journal. I remember how exciting it was to publish our first book, Kenward Elmslie's *Blast from the Past*. I remember driving a delivery van. I remember when we planted our first redbud tree in the house we bought in East Austin. I remember coming home to find Hoa wearing black motorcycle boots, holding a glass of wine, and telling me that there was a snake in the house. I remember her pregnant and swimming. I remember learning how to look at words through her words. I remember reading her poems and learning that sound is in conflict with ideas. I remember how she delights in poems by Wyatt and Keats. I remember her reading "To Autumn" at equinox. I remember that Time will drag its Claws through us. I remember how she loves Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt." I remember her planting the butterfly bush and digging up ragweed. I remember her ability to make good campfires.

I live with a writer. Writers claim authority, whether they like it or not. Perhaps it's the way

one's hand falls in conversation. Perhaps it's the turn of an eye on your words, making you see yourself through some other, unspoken, perspective. Authority can be claimed in many ways: the pitch of voice, the accumulation of insights, and the willingness to revise one's claims, the embrace of the dailiness of things – the "river of shit" a friend calls it. And poems float out of this river too.

Hoa writes slowly. She composes during a class she teaches now from our home on Sundays. I take our children – Keaton and Waylon – out to play. She teaches, writes. I come home. She types. She likes to look at her poems. I read them. Or I listen to her read them. She has a thing about words, going by ear. It's New American, or Black Mountain: Olson, Creeley, Kyger. She is not one with things. She is she. Words are other. I am other. The children, too, are other. The salvia and sage. The distraction of the news. Other. And yet in the field of her poems, life.

Wore a Hemp Hat

Wore a hemp hat ate grapes
A list of future baby names:
Waylon Angelica Martin Lucia
Rhymed some words & read a poem
Still damp (the laundry) Come on sun
Swished the toilets and watered the plants
By March I'll have gained 2 pounds
In uterine muscle Ate gross cinnamon bun

I know that hat. I see the word "hat" in the poem above. Do I still "know" that "hat?" Now, turned through Hoa, "hat" is prelude to a grape snack. A lot happens in this short poem. There are baby names. Domestic duties. The marvelous, penultimate line-break brings attention to the maternal fact – the Real – an intrusion of tissue. The cultural context of conventional food as "gross" resonates with the engorged muscle – the body's ripening.

We were preparing to leave for New York City. November. Hoa told me she was pregnant. I had no imagination of what that could mean. Hoa, by contrast, had the necessary foresight to look into things. "I don't want to vaccinate our child," she said. I began looking at the debate around vaccination. She began baking bread, making cheese, fermenting cabbages. We slept with the baby between us. She found communities of parents who, like us, related the child's life through the ritual of the day rather than the disciplining of the young mind by force. (You want to build authority in the child, not to exert yours on him. Authority is not a possession. It is a perception of otherness anyway.) She had the mind to find out the essentials. And the fortitude to stand by her knowledge of bodies and babies. She was determined to protect her domestic space from the poisonous other – a culture gone berserk on chemicals. She turned to an old knowledge, and old ways.

Hoa and I both have had affinities for the works of prior generations. We come from what the media called Generation X. Hoa grew up in the punk rock dens of Washington, D. C., while I found my language composed of the vocabulary of country music. An older, mournful sound: Hank Williams, Waylon Jennings, Buck Owens, Tammy Wynett. I think of our affinities often in poetry. We are bound to the obscure, the observant. Those who weave life and art as one practice, as ways to encounter what is other. We pretend to distrust baby boomers. Sometimes we jokingly call them the Lost Generation. Spoiled, impatient, demanding, and destructive. In *The Grand Piano* Barrett Watten, more than any other contributor to that "experiment in collective autobiography," exemplifies the negative traits of his generation. Once, after reading him, I wondered about the limits of self-appetite. I wondered if this "experiment" would be in print if Creeley were still alive.

Watten challenges a New American authority. He questions another generation's claims of love. And yet, these are not questions. They are assertions, railroading over the other, the prior. To bury acts of mind in the noise of self. "Love," Watten writes in reference to the New Americans, "became the hitting end of a *big stick*, the final authority by which all difference, particularity, and belatedness would be put down forever. *Love*, my friends may remember, was the big stick Duncan used to protect his originary interest in Zukofsky." Next to this passage which deals more too with Sherman Paul's *The Lost America of Love*, essays on Dorn, Duncan, and Creeley, I have drawn a long, vertical line. Hoa laughs at the annotation penciled along this marking: "assholery."

If I Can't Have Another Baby

If I can't have another baby I'll bake
midnight cookies a little nut cookie

Forming something out of nothing

or more precisely a more complex something
from a simpler something

"The rising flood is the begetter of gods"

I drink from a cup and so draw my omens

The man said, "We could never do that. . ."
motioning toward my toddler-infant "balancing act"

Hoa's poetry looks back to another generation's concerns – but in a new way – because she is not of that other world. It is difficult to imagine a "language poet" baking in a poem. We have been so trained to suspect the pronoun "I" and to recoil at the subject's "lyric" momentum in a poem. Rightly. There are numerous horrors in poems named "I" that drag readers through an endless metaphor (tree) to arrive at some ambiguous epiphany ("I suck"). Barrett Watten wanted to read Zukofsky at Iowa. He argued against the epiphanic syllogism practiced by his more conventional peers. He favored the dislocated subject fragmented in the materiality of language. But the New Americans dealt with these problems too – in *their* ways – making claims of authority – with a pitch of voice – a trust and willingness to abide by their perceptive cues. Hoa trusts that voice. There are "omens" in her poems. "I" drinks "from a cup." And yet the problem of subjectivity and language remains. The poem provides testament to this snarl. The poet's authority arrives through the organizational pitch of the poem. It is not a networked plan of action. One must really scratch their heads in wonder, I once said to Hoa. There are genuine poet-heroes in the figures of Olson, Dorn, Creeley, and Duncan. What figures of comparable magnitude follow theirs – perceptually?

I remember eating Chinese food with Hoa and others at a place in North Beach I now forget the name of with Philip Whalen. I remember the first time we saw copies of *J* and *Black Mountain Review* at Joanne Kyger's house in Bolinas. I remember meeting Diane di Prima with Hoa in Japan Town. I remember Diane telling us about meeting Ezra Pound and about giving the poem a material place in the world as an object. I remember sitting in Wheeler Hall with Hoa as Charles Bernstein read poems and thinking that this was the same place Charles Olson led an all-night poetry filibuster. I remember seeing a picture of Amiri Baraka reading from *Skanky Possum*. I remember seeing Larry Eigner wheeled into the New College auditorium. I remember being driven with Hoa by Kent Johnson

through southern Wisconsin and stopping for beer and cheese in the little town of Monroe one early and cold December. I remember that Hoa and I drove with Rachel Levitsky one Thanksgiving to meet Roberto Tejada and how the next day we visited Robert Creeley and a hawk landed in his backyard so we named our son, who Hoa then carried, Keaton which, among other things, means “place of the hawks.” I remember how Hoa and I met Charles Bernstein, quite awkwardly, at Lincoln Center during the intermission of Kenward Elmslie’s opera, *Lizzie Borden*. I remember riding on the subway with Steven Clay. I remember eating blintzes with Simon Pettet. I remember meeting Trevor Winkfield. I remember throwing wildflower seeds in late winter with Hoa.

[Pretty Headdress on Kidumiel]

Pretty headdress on Kidumiel
Kick the angel in the air
Kick and beat the brilliant air
Adorn your loud voice

Hurt my broken grinding kiss
Keep your pretty headdress house
I love you, afraid mother
Pure angel Lameck leave me

infant kisses on my T-shirt
Let me bleed fat and big
Slide alongside my boat
to mix my years with serpent tears

Kidumiel, an amulet angel invoked to protect the newborn child. Lameck, “a pure angel, invoked in black-magic rites, specifically in the conjuration of the Sword.” Tenderness and ferocity joined in the “afraid mother.” Protect the child. Turn on her imagination of new life. The other of her mother body. The others of the phenomenal realm. “Serpent tears” because all things end, transposing from the tension of spirit and matter to other matter.

Love as warfare. As an utterance – a secretion. A sound by which to rest. An active verb or authorship. An unwinding and decomposing. A belief in others to reveal the world. A right word held fast and then tossed. A deed. A testament to a silence that will blow over us – our ash.

Green anole visits the desert willow. Another thrives in Hoa’s closet, brown, careful to avoid children.

And meanwhile there’s work to do.