

# THIS SENTENCE WILL ALWAYS BE THERE: AN INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN KILLIAN

MIRANDA MELLIS

**MIRANDA MELLIS:** I'm excited to do this interview, but also unsure of where to begin. I feel at once an admiring, strangerly shyness and a knowing, readerly closeness with you. I imagine others have this dual feeling, of both shyness and intimacy. This is surely one of the effects (or affects) of working autobiographically and also gossiping, in the New Narrative mode, with readers as friends. It's a sort of love triangle between the reader, the writer, and books. I can't help but wonder: will you be like your writing?

**KEVIN KILLIAN:** I hope people aren't as shy around me as I have been around others I admire, painfully so, or else I would get drunk to overcome my inhibitions and that was the other side of the coin. I can still recall the embarrassment of having one's hand removed scornfully from the crotch of one's idol. But if people have read my writing at all, they know I'm not exactly a smooth operator, so maybe they feel more kindly towards me, like I was the backwards little girl in the house across the way, who would be so pleased with a handful of daisies. Yes, that's me. OK, let me think, the people who I have met who were least like their writing were Dennis Cooper, of course, so Sadean in his imagination and in the thicket of his writing, and yet, one on one, unimaginably sweet and considerate, and kind. Rae Armantrout, her poetry a brilliant zigzag of thought and feeling, condensed and sparkling, and in person, I think, my favorite gossip of all time. I suppose there are also the opposites of these two—a witty writer or artist, say, who shows the ravages of deep depression as did Tennessee Williams—

or the Jean Stafford types, once geniuses, who now can barely flip through the pages of a glossy. New Narrative is perhaps not so much a style as a way of living in the world, in the terrible social world which is so excruciating, as well as in the socio-economic nightmare we're all trying to breathe in and breathe through and we can't. I don't know now if Bob [Glück] and Steve [Abbott] and Bruce [Boone] were actually encouraging us to gossip, but we certainly felt we'd been given French leave to do so 24/7. Gossip shores up, even creates, community; community leads to action—to direct political action. Well, that's a shorthand method of explaining what happens in *Jack the Modernist* and *The Truth About Ted* and *The Lizard Club*.

**MM:** On the subject of identification (“I am just the backwards little girl...”), in your keynote at Orono last summer you spoke of Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and other gay poets in San Francisco in the 80s identifying as sages and mages, “without irony” as you put it. Does irony dip in the 80s then peak in the 90s? How does irony connect for you with your curiosity about the artist-without-talent, the magical confluence that drew you to Kylie Minogue? Is irony key because of arriving in San Francisco, as you put it at Orono, “after the party was over”? I remember being bombarded with sex positive and safe sex propaganda in equal parts in the mid-90s, the era of the “ethical slut.” Judith Butler’s performativity and John Cage’s indeterminacy were the theories that went with our practices: gender and sound as continuums. But where are we on the irony continuum today?

**KK:** I got caught up in your story about growing up when Judith Butler was already in the ascendant, already a fact of life, and your subtle interweaving of the concurrent insistence on safe sex and STD testing, with the fertility I have found in facing the blank canvas of the talentless, like he or she who would look at the sun during an eclipse, or the POP art fan who empties his or her intake of a Jasper Johns flag by glancing at the white gallery wall nearby and seeing the mocking Johns colors realign themselves into the good ol’ red, white and blue.

OK—whether irony peaked in the 1990s. I saw the 90s dominated by a series of efforts to combat irony and to return it to minor league status, but for you, maybe that came later. I saw the whole rise of the internet as a force by which people would put aside their ironies and find love somewhere,

even in dark corners, at which point they would be freed from irony's thrall. But so much of that is subjective, depending on where one's standing. Is Conceptualism, for example, all about irony, or is it irony-free? Is the work of Marina Abramovic or of Thomas Kinkade ironic in some way? I use irony to buffet my vanity from a host of perceived (or possible) enemies, but eventually when one has reached the 1 per cent on the one hand or has sunk behind the poverty line on the other, I will no longer need it. Those paying off their student loans must still need it, like drowning sailors their shards of driftwood.

**MM:** Cassie Thornton had the terribly ironic insight (on which she based subsequent projects) that as a graduate student, the art she was producing was *debt*, circulating invisibly. Talk about a non-site! Currently, I'm co-teaching a class on site-specific art, which tends not to be ironic. Who are the crucial artists for you, Kevin?

**KK:** In history, so many favorites but I always return to Picasso, Florine Stettheimer, Marsden Hartley, Duchamp, Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Frink, Warhol, Jacob Lawrence, Tchelitchev, Sturtevant, Mike Kelley. Oh—and Kylie of course! In real life I've known and worked with a few great artists and each interaction has been an important one for me. I'm spoiled, really. I've gotten to work closely with Raymond Pettibon, Fran Herndon, Kota Ezawa, Colter Jacobsen, Matt Gordon, Ugo Rondinone, Gregg Bordowitz, etc. Some do work in site-specific ways, but I can't say that site specificity has ever been a big thing for me. If someone told me, "wow, we're half an hour away from the Spiral Jetty," I would say "driver, drive on, I think I see a Howard Johnson's up ahead." One story that appealed to me was the one that had Duchamp getting ready for war by making mini-versions of all of his prewar masterpieces, versions small enough to pack together in a single suitcase, one suitable for crossing borders. That said something to me, perhaps about nomadism, something about the times being such that we might all be forced to flee at any moment. All sorts of people love site-specific work: maybe I live too much in my head?

**MM:** I am a sucker for the Spiral Jetty. It's so monumentally butch and yet... it's a spiral made of crystals! Very witchy. But speaking of monumental works: you've just published a novel you have been working on for two decades, *Spreadeagle* (Publication Studio, 2012). Can you say something about what the novel allows that the story or poem does not?

**KK:** Stories and poems are all very well (that's a nice Maggie Smith way to begin), but what a novel gives me is the challenge. I'm sort of a short-term memory kind of guy, so writing a story over a span of days is more difficult than for some others I think. I blame it on my day job, which is largely answering the phone. Has the phone ever interrupted you when you were writing a sentence? It can be trying, but when it's what they're paying you for, you answer it anyway, and this sentence will always be there when you get off the phone. And then it will ring again within two minutes time, so your style becomes disjunctive. I used to write ornately, now I write in little blips and squeaks, like Astro barking in *The Jetsons*. I start a sentence, the phone rings, I go back and I start a new sentence. Who cares about finishing that last one. And the subject of my phone interchange naturally colors what I'm writing. So in some ways the lyric form works better for me, for often I don't have the energy to find my notes from yesterday, or even turn back in my notepad to half an hour ago. I've tried to write short stories with the heft and depth of a novel, as Faulkner did—and I have once or twice, “Greensleeves” in *Impossible Princess* (City Lights, 2009) was a novel in miniature, as was “Santa” in *Little Men* (Hard Press Editions, 1996). But in other ways I've a long-term mind—I'm a Capricorn, so I'm steady and loyal. I would like to have written more novels, and I have two or three in the works, some from years back, that make the 22 years it took to finish *Spreadeagle* feel like ten minutes ago.

I love biographies maybe for the same reason, the immensity of the task. *Spreadeagle* was more difficult to finish than either of my other novels, *Shy* (Crossing Press, 1989) or *Arctic Summer* (Masquerade, 1997) because of the social challenges first of all. When I began I was writing a novel about the AIDS crisis and the activist response. I kept a finger on the pulse of the storyline, mirroring it on my own experience in the middle of the homocore days (which were tremendously exciting in San Francisco), but with the widespread use of the so-called drug cocktails in the mid 1990s, some of the wind seemed to vanish from my narrative's sails. I couldn't even acknowledge that much, for quite a long time. What was stalling my own little novel was, of course, a great boon for society in general, so it seemed churlish, even evil to complain. Some folks asked me, why don't you make it a novel set in 1990? But my first two novels were set in long ago historical periods and I felt like I wanted to make it a contemporary story, so the plot

constantly shifted from year to year, and sometimes I thought I would never finish it, or that maybe it should have been written as two books instead of one. And also I didn't know how it would end, as the Internet and allied technologies came along and one by one made obsolete every plot point I had counted on. In *Spreadeagle*, a handsome stranger comes to a little town and for a long time the plot was that the townspeople were wondering who he was, whereas nowadays they could just Google him. And the other plot was all about how I couldn't reach him (so X and Y happened), and nowadays the question would be why didn't you just reach him on his cell phone? I'm sure these two inventions alone have scuttled more novels than any others in all of literary history, or else I'm crazy. You couldn't have *Wuthering Heights* with Google, right? Nor *Evangeline* if she or Gabriel had a cell phone.

**MM:** Forms are so contingent! Was Woolf the first to clearly articulate how money, gender, and genre are laminated? Disjunction has been claimed as the poet's weapon against ideology and univocality, but as you point out, it's also just a description of what time is like and therefore what forms are possible when our labor is for rent. Which comes first the chicken of necessity or the egg of theory? How have theorists helped you do your work?

**KK:** I'm not sure, Miranda! You know how hard it is to see the thing when you're in the middle of it, and it's in your nose and you're just trying to swim through it, like Ellen De Generes in *Finding Nemo*. To get the big picture I have long depended on theory and criticism, though sometimes that turns into a different kind of immersion, the way that when one talked to Bruce Boone long enough in the 1980s, one became convinced that the world was pretty much run by disciples of the Société d'Acephale, and that we should all be having SM sex and giving each other vast quantities of potlatch, while in the 1990s he convinced me that gnosticism was both the way out and the way in—and p.s., after all these years I'm still not 100 per cent sure I could tell you what gnosticism is, but could pinpoint it through rhetorical analysis of an ad or a reality TV show. But anyhow, broadly speaking, when I was your age I knew nothing except a little bit of Angus Fletcher and Northrop Frye and I.A. Richards, and Marx, Frazer and Freud, but today I know more. I think I write better now, but was that just quitting booze? I can't say which came first, but I suspect it was several things. Arriving in San Francisco

when I did meant a total brainwash, exposure to all sorts of new systems (including full time work!) which required gargantuan effort, against which my lazy ass received a new kind of pounding. I wonder what it would be like to have two weeks off for vacation—I'd just fill it in with professional work of one kind or another. I'd be the worst sort of father, that's for sure—the sort of Dad who doesn't remember his children's birthdays or even their age. "Words," Spicer wrote (in "Homage to Creeley") "turn mysteriously against those who use them / Hello says the apple / Both of us were object." I always, thanks to Bruce, read this as, "Both of us were abject."

**MM:** Last year, Camille Roy sent me the Nag Hammadi text *The Thunder Perfect Mind*. It was so familiar, but I couldn't place it. Then I realized I'd heard it sung at the Reclaiming Collective's Spiral Dance! A gnostic number, and here I thought Starhawk made it up. The dead live on in writing and singing.

In the short story "Dietmar Lutz Mon Amour" (*Impossible Princess*), memoir is cued by a plurality that includes all of the dead—history itself: "He and it and history and my age all prompt me to tell this love story as though Marguerite Duras were watching me." I can't imagine writing a memoir except as a fiction or a plurality, a collective composition. I find writing down actual memories, as scenes, immobilizing—turns me to sludge. What relation does your memory of yourself as a character in your fictions have to your memories per se?

**KK:** I wonder if *The Thunder Perfect Mind* isn't what the authors of the musical *Les Misérables* had in mind when the despairing heroine sings that even at the moment when everything seems to be bliss, "the tigers come at night...with their voices soft as thunder"? It's a word so vivid and yet one to which meaning sticks and repels like a brand of physics.

As you say, the dead live on in writing and singing. In the days since you sent your question we have heard of the death of French poet Anne-Marie Albiach, 75 years old, in Paris, whose work came as a revelation to me in the months leading up to her 60th birthday in August 1996. I don't know French well enough to read it properly, but Albiach seems to have attracted more than her share of wonderful translators who gave it to me good, the equivocations, the hesitations, the blanknesses of speech impermeably allied to a wild range of emotional and phenomenological tenors—I had almost

said terrors. This part of being alive, of tending to the realm beyond our senses, was her bread and butter, *de tous les jours*. You cite my use of Duras in writing my memoir “Dietmar Lutz Mon Amour.” When a great love occurs between people of two nations, what author do you think of? For me it was her, the crazy NATO-isms of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. “All these years I have been looking for a love impossible.” He points to her, “Your name is Nevers. My name is Hiroshima,” the places we come from substituting for our names. Speaking across the divide of nations as an allegory for speaking across the thin line between life and death. Really, she had it all—didn’t she?—and it wasn’t about making sense of things per se.

“I can’t imagine,” you say, “writing a memoir except as a fiction or a plurality.” I wonder if that might be because the event hasn’t come yet in your life that you want to treat in terms of non-fiction? I started as a novelist, wrote a Nancy Drew book when I was ten (laid in Japan!), but then as things mounted up that I could not deal with in life, fiction shrank from me like a wet piece of cellophane set on a bush in the mid-day sun. I do understand your sense that writing things down freezes them in one’s mind to a certain “immobilizing” totality. But when you’re on as much Wellbutrin as I, that’s exactly what you need, that and a camera.

Collective composition—yes, I subscribe to that too. I write often in collaboration with others. For me it is a way of studying at their feet, of secreting their juices, like I’m the bee sleeping in the honeysuckle. Can you imagine what it was like for me to write a story with Gail Scott, with Glen Helfand, with Derek McCormack or Lawrence Braithwaite? Street cred isn’t the word for it!

**MM:** The events have certainly come that I ought to *try* to treat in terms of nonfiction, but I don’t know if I have the stamina. Or maybe it’s just my indoctrination: “Who are *you* to tell the story of your life!” As if the most ominous structure of authority of all is the idea of the individual (Maybe so!). I should co-write it with someone who wasn’t there.

A few years ago I asked you what you were working on and you said (do you remember?), “I’ve written enough.” So I’d like to ask you what you’re writing next, but I’ll ask a perhaps more capacious question instead: What is on the horizon?

**KK:** Funny thing but just this weekend your cousin Frances Richard and I were talking about this very subject! I was telling her that in the coming months I want to buckle down to the introduction that Dodie and I will be writing to our forthcoming anthology of New Narrative materials from the 70s, 80s, and early 90s. It's almost as though, I explained to her, that we are the wrong people to write this critical introduction for precisely the reason that we were there through it. Not enough distance. Frances countered spiritedly that in her work on Matta-Clark she has found the primary materials (are they primary? I mean taped interviews with Matta-Clark and his circle, oral histories, etc.) absolutely the foundation for the things she's thinking about today. This seems to chime in with what you're saying about needing a co-writer who wasn't there!

I'm working on a new novel; on a sequel to my memoirs called *Bachelors Get Lonely*; I'm starting a new play with poet Suzanne Stein, for the San Francisco Poets Theater. I'm continuing to add more photos to *Tagged*, my series of portraits of artists, musicians, poets, filmmakers, creative types, mostly guys, most of them naked or nearly so, their junk hidden, sometimes, by a drawing of male genitalia that Raymond Pettibon made a few years back. I've had a few shows with these photos, and a book, and I want to do more. It's the funnest project I've ever done, I think. And I have finished a new manuscript of poems called *Tweaky Village*, now I'm entering it in contests and losing to people with MFAs of course. Sigh. So many projects that I won't finish all of them before I die. But Dodie and I have secured a literary executor so I can rest easy knowing that life was better to me than to nearly anyone else I can think of. That's one thing Miranda: I've been super lucky.



**KEVIN KILLIAN**, one of the original “New Narrative” writers, has written three novels, *Shy* (1989), *Arctic Summer* (1997), and *Spreadeagle* (2012), a book of memoirs, and three books of stories. He has also written four books of poetry, most recently *Tony Greene Era* (2017), from Wonder Books. With Peter Gizzi he edited *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* (2008) for Wesleyan University Press. Wesleyan also brought out Killian and Lew Ellingham’s acclaimed biography of Spicer in 1998.

For the San Francisco Poets Theater Killian has written fifty-one plays, and the anthology he compiled with David Brazil—*The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater, 1945-1985*—has become the standard book on the subject. Recent projects include *Tagged*, Killian’s intimate photographs of poets, artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers and intellectuals; and with Dodie Bellamy, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing, 1977-1997*. He teaches writing to MFA students at California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

**MIRANDA MELLIS** is the author of *Demystifications*, *The Spokes*, *None of This Is Real*, *The Quarry*, *Materialisms* and *The Revisionist*. She co-authored *The Instead* a book-length conversation with Emily Abendroth and co-edited *The Encyclopedia Project*.