

*Reading Gail Sher* describes the development of Gail Sher's poetry over a thirty-five year period: the early radical language experiments, the reimagining of ancient Asian literary and musical forms, the "wisdom mind" poems rooted in Tibetan Buddhism, and her late work, influenced by contemporary writers and her experience as a psychotherapist. The book includes detailed illustrations of the linguistic strategies she has used to help a reader "open to the inconceivable." It concludes with a bibliography and two brief chronologies, one of her outer life and one of her inner, psychological relationship with language.

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*"When I found Gail Sher's books, I imagined her having stepped from a Japanese Noh play. Her poems, sharpened by rigorous Buddhist discipline...grabbed me instantly. Despite their wild turns of phrase... they showed a sensibility that was refined, educated, attentive to natural detail. They put me in mind of the writers of Japan's Heian court, the best of whom were women. I still hear echoes of Murasaki Shikibu or Ono no Komachi when I open Gail's books."*

—ANDREW SCHELLING

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Gail Sher lives and works in the San Francisco Bay area as a writer, teacher and psychotherapist. For more information and to read her poetry online go to: [gailsher.com](http://gailsher.com) or to [library.buffalo.edu/collections/gail-sher](http://library.buffalo.edu/collections/gail-sher).



## Reading Gail Sher

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*by Gail Sher*

Reading Gail Sher

## Also by Gail Sher

### PROSE

*Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious*

*One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers*

*The Intuitive Writer: Listening to Your Own Voice*

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### POETRY

*Early Work*

*Pale Sky*

*Five Haiku Narratives*

*Ezekiel*

*Sunny Day, Spring*

*Mingling the Threefold Sky*

*The Twelve Nidānas*

*Figures in Blue*

*The Bardo Books*

*White Bird*

*Mother's Warm Breath*

*The Tethering of Mind to Its Five Permanent Qualities*

*The Haiku Masters: Four Poetic Diaries*

*though actually it is the same earth*

*East Wind Melts the Ice*

*The Copper Pheasant Ceases Its Call*

*old dri's lament*

*Calliope*

*Who, a Licchavi*

*Watching Slow Flowers*

*DOHĀ*

*Birds of Celtic Twilight: A Novel in Verse*

*redwind daylong daylong*

*Once There Was Grass*

*RAGA*

*Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms*

*Moon of The Swaying Buds*

*Marginalia*

*la*

*KUKLOS*

*Cops*

*Broke Aide*

*Rouge to Beak Having Me*

*(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem*

*From another point of view the woman seems to be resting*

# Reading Gail Sher

*Gail Sher*



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for Brendan



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## Preface

“Poems need prose precincts,” Ted Hughes once wrote to a friend. Like animals, poems could become extinct if the poet didn’t endow them with a “habitat.” Critics and poets alike, he felt, have an obligation to *steward* the “achieved human voice” found in poetry.

“Achieved” is the important word. Writing-over-time accretes into a voice that rings of the poet and *that* grows her poems, gradually, into maturity.

This book is an attempt to locate and describe the “habitats” of my own poetry. In retrospect, and certainly not by design, it seems to have organized itself into phases:

1. *Radical Language Experiments, 1982-1997*

When I first began writing, everything was a test. I had no idea of writing “poetry.” I never read poetry. I avidly read prose. But my *concerns*, as I reluctantly learned, were all of them of a poet, not a novelist, short story writer or essayist. I came to understand that I *am* a poet because I *think* like a poet. And it

was singularly poets and poet-editors who first saw and supported my work.

An early distinguishing underlying feature—that my writing simply arose—remains to this day. I don't write what I already know, or perhaps, stated more exactly, since my writing stems primarily from the “linguistic unconscious”<sup>1</sup> and not from everyday consciousness, I find it a continual surprise.

## 2. *Asian-influenced work, 1997-2008*

Taking writing as a practice followed eleven years of studying Zen. Living a monastic life with its strict schedule of *zazen* (sitting meditation), assigned work, *dharma* talks, *dokusan* (interviews with one's teacher), and the concentrated reading of Zen texts immersed my mind and body in an ancient Japanese culture. Actually my Asian-influenced poetry derives, in addition to Japan, from India, China, and Tibet and draws from Zen *and* Tibetan Buddhism (both philosophy and practice) *and* Hinduism (both philosophy and practice) which I studied for many years after leaving the zendo.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious*, pp. 3-6.

In this aspect of my work, I re-imagined ancient Asian musical and literary forms using:

— *haiku* to create extended narratives<sup>2</sup>

— *haibun* (prose + *haiku*) to write biographies<sup>3</sup> and autobiography<sup>4</sup>

— four-lined Chinese *kanshi* to establish the rhythms of four book-length poems<sup>5</sup>

The foundation for *RAGA* was the Indian *raga* and for *DOHĀ* the Tibetan devotional song.

### 3. *The Wisdom-Mind Collection*, 2009-2013

Between 2009 and 2013 I wrote a series of books, beginning with *The Tethering of Mind to Its Five Permanent Qualities*, and culminating in *The Twelve Nidānas* and *Mingling the Threefold Sky* that are rooted in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and

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<sup>2</sup> *Five Haiku Narratives*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Haiku Masters: Four Poetic Diaries*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Moon of the Swaying Buds*.

<sup>5</sup> *Watching Slow Flowers; Once There Was Grass; redwind daylong daylong; Look at That Dog All Dressed Out in Plum Blossoms*.

dedicated to “stretching” English in order to create gaps so that Wisdom-Mind might flow through to the reader.<sup>6</sup> Wisdom and knowledge are different of course: the former cannot be grasped by the intellect alone. The idea in these poems is to not-quite-make-sense. The beauty (hopefully) of the surface language + the strategy of “approaching-narrative” first intrigues then *holds* a reader, allowing, in stillness, the dawning of a new kind of intelligence. As a poet I feel that this body of work is my most important.

#### 4. *Late Work*, 2014-present

*Sunny Day*, *Spring*, *Ezekiel*, *Pale Sky* and *Elm* (in press) are examples of writing indirectly influenced by contemporary writers and twenty-five years of practicing psychotherapy. Compared to the earlier work they are more accessible yet, deeply interior, they too reside in a vacuum of silence.

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<sup>6</sup> *Mother's Warm Breath*, *White Bird* and *The Bardo Books* were also written from this perspective.

The opening section of this book, “The *Way* of the Poem,” details some of the linguistic strategies I’ve used to help a reader open to the inconceivable. Cumulatively they present the poem as a tool, poetry as a Path.

The next section, “The *Way* of the Living Word,” is about the word itself—the body of the word, the mind of the word, the transmission that each word carries. Headings such as these alert the reader to a “take” on language that is visceral rather than cognitive. For reading my poetry, this is key.

The final section, “Late Work,” addresses writing that speaks to a different part of the brain. Prose-like in appearance it makes room for the conceptual, yet remains rooted in the concerns that characterize my work as a whole.

Appendix I contains reviews by poets who have their own ideas about my work, and an early letter-to-the-editor I wrote prior to publishing my own poetry, defending a poet whose work I felt was misunderstood but whose approach I admired and

still do.

Appendix II contains chronologies of my external life circumstances and an internal, psychological history of my relationship with language.

## Acknowledgments

The many people who have supported my writing over the years are too numerous to recall. My deepest apologies in advance to those precious people whose help I remember but whose names I can no longer remember. My heartfelt thanks to them and to:

—Beau Beausoleil and Merry White Benezra who saw, encouraged, wisely critiqued and supported my work from its earliest beginnings.

—Robert Duncan, who attended my first poetry reading at Beau Beausoleil's San Francisco bookstore. He was standing in the back and after I read he called out, "Would you read that again?" Afterwards, he introduced himself and encouraged me to send what I had read to a new poetry journal at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), *Credences*. My work appeared in the inaugural issue of that journal, along with poetry by Duncan himself. It was my first poetry publication.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Nine Pieces," *Credences: A Journal of Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, New Series, vol. 1, no. 1, Buffalo: State University of New York, 1981, pp. 16-20



—Robert Bertholf, editor of *Credences* and curator of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, who invited me to Buffalo to read, address his graduate students and stay at his beautiful home as a way of promoting my experiments in non-conceptual poetic language.

—Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop who designed, printed and published my early “retablo,” *Broke Aide*, in their elegant Burning Deck series, chose it as an NEA selection for the Frankfurt Book Fair, and remained supportive and available for many years.

—Charles Bernstein who attended every Village reading I gave, and offered the kind of critical affirmation that helps poets grow.

—Kathleen Fraser, whose perceptive analysis of my first book, *From another point of view the woman seems to be resting*, placed my work in an historic line of modernist women poets—Gertrude Stein, H.D., Lorine Niedecker—thereby recognizing in today’s women poets what the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut saw in modernist playwrights and composers: the articulation of a hidden suffering characteristic of

our age, thus creating the possibility of new forms of wholeness.<sup>8</sup>

—Joey Simas who published *Rouge to beak having me* in his Paris-based Moving Letters Press in the days when poet-friend publishers were not rare, and translated a long section from *Broke Aide* into French for a French anthology of New American poets<sup>9</sup>, something I didn't think was possible.

—Andrew Feenberg whose invitation to lecture to a group of innovative thinkers in business, the military and the sciences inspired the talk that led to *Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious*.

—Jessica Grim, co-founder, with Melanie Neilson, of *Big Allis*, the poetry journal that promoted the experimental work of women writers early in their careers—exactly my situation when they welcomed me into their first issue.

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Fraser, "Overheard," *Poetics Journal*, no. 4, May 1984, pp. 98-105. On Kohut, see Gail Sher, *Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> 49+1: *Nouveaux Poètes Américains*, choisis par Emmanuel Hocquard et Claude Royet-Journoud. Royaumont (France), 1991, pp. 222-223.

—Leslie Scalapino, fellow former graduate student in English at UC Berkeley, who arranged for me to move into the apartment next to hers, and joined me for long walks around Berkeley and fun out-of-town trips to visit other poets. She read my work and offered invaluable criticism regularly and generously.

—Andrew Schelling, friend, poet, teacher, who attended my readings, shared the pleasures of co-writing Japanese style *renga* together, and honored me with reviews and jacket cover statements erudite beyond my dreams.

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—Ben Friedlander, Pat Reed, David Sheidlower and Jessica Grim who were part of a poetry “neighborhood” that surrounded me and accompanied me through all the years of my poetic tests.

—Michael Basinski, Curator of the Poetry Collection

at the University at Buffalo, who has supported my work for over thirty years. Most recently, he and his knowledgeable staff, especially James Maynard, a Robert Duncan scholar, have been expertly archiving my books, manuscripts, correspondence, art, and all the paraphernalia related to the poetic struggle that has been uniquely mine.

To all of them I offer a deep bow of gratitude.



## Introduction

*“Language is beautiful even without us. Once it was put into motion it was beautiful.”*

—Beau Beausoleil

*Before the Poem is the Poem*

*Because* of the poem, the poem can happen.

Literature *does* work by “penetrating consciousness at a level not reached by the speech of everyday transactions.” (Ted Hughes)

The poem, superseding event, is like a brain clicking away, thinking in riffs and patches and incomplete discrete phrases.

Yet the whole is intentional and feels authentic *because* it attends to the whispered voices in the gaps.

“Not often have I come upon words with so much mystery which at the same time seem so responsible. They have teeth” (a critic of my work).

This is the poet’s gentleness.

And the dignity in her lines.

Its language, connected to itself by a kind of prayer,  
propels a search wherein nothing provable is  
unearthed, yet the act of opening one's mind creates a  
free moment in which existence itself speaks lucidly  
and candidly if not, strictly speaking, rationally.

And this is how the truth is grasped: feelingly.

*The Double Life of A Poem*

So there's the poem that let's you "in" (if you allow it to open you) but "in" is not the poem. "In" is your heart and mind.

Yet you read with your mind also.

Your mind reads the poem, which is your mind.

The poem itself disappears.

It is the you-before-the-you that is trying to read itself.

As long as you think this, there is dualistic mind.

But that same mind, entering the poem . . .

She tries to feel her floor, but she is thinking about a cavity, something fluid like a worm and she wants to *say* the worm.

A moan is a moan and where can it reside if not on her floor, the speech body of that word.

She jerks it up but trips so that *she* is the



floor and the glue and the shame. *I have  
a habit of glue*, she confesses.

A flame of everything sears into shape,  
which is not the word, but the colorless  
basis of its Pure Land.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Mingling the Threefold Sky*, p. 5.

## The *Way* of the Poem

When a poem of uncertain portent maintains its own isolation and integrity, like music, an independent language all its own will sing the place, inviting the reader.

For music can perhaps be thought of as pure-logic divested of the bothersome friction of words.

Along with the words we ingest the pure logic that is realized on its own, with its own wit, its own far-infrared dialectic.

A handful of parentheses sets a mood for the optional and *that's* all you have, like the flick of a conductor's wand.<sup>11</sup>

*geshé geshé*

you hook the word

o Usnisavijaya

(Shukden of despoil)

---

<sup>11</sup> Parentheses don't contain. They *shield*. As Kathleen Fraser points out, they are also "a usage which women continue to find useful in breaking out of a misleading sense of stability." *Poetics Journal*, no. 4, May 1984, p. 100.

to gull the sky  
sweet gull of northwest flowers

I am tall  
I am slow full  
walker<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Who, a* Licchavi, p. 43.

## *Memory*

A poem has its own memory.

And the poem's memory provides a *feeling* context to the private memory of each word.

Their inter-change creates a field.

"I SEE it," says a reader who then sallies along smelling all the flowers.

First seeing, then entering the poem's field, in part authors the poem's memory.

Actually poetry *is* memory, endowing words with a kind of eternity.

*Allure*

While the poet's oral rendering of her poem is a powerful venue for the poem, sometimes *on the page* a voice can be more "catchable."

Being drawn into its world, partaking of that world such that for the moment of the poem, *you* are the person, affected.

Certain poems, like *Paris*, so completely BELIEVE in themselves that their world—even one word—becomes an entire creed.

I see a photograph of her throat, which is not the actual throat. *Where is her throat in the wake of that?* (I'm guessing *that* means *after* her throat.)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *White Bird*, p. 68.

*Frisson*

The frisson of a word rouses a reader.

As does the frisson of a phrase (the electrical atmosphere in its magnetic field).

The frisson of a word, the frisson of a phrase *is* the poem's event.

I see the fish who is my brother. Its time is  
pink like mine. We flow in the same yard.<sup>14</sup>

When reading Gail Sher, stay with *that*.

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Bardo Books*, p. 3.

## *Tension-Sense Dialogue*

A word does not designate.

A word speaks (jells) within its individual context and resting in the detail of its universal specificity is never just, say, “duck,” or “Buddha” or “tit.”

Add the presence of another word and “things” happen—a word gets tense.

Some things make words more tense, like following “thought” with “of” or taking a noun in the singular.

And sense (in our usual understanding)—sense dissipates tension.

Actually sense works for language in much the same way as background music for script.

The action rolls along but then someone says something off or there’ll be a pause and if the background music captures everyone’s secondary attention, no one even notices.

Without it (if we don’t use sense in this way), all of the other aspects of a word are exposed and can work directly.

*Non-sense*

Sense, like a cart rambling down a long, linear road, carries a phrase not carried by all of the other aspects.

Scrambling-what-*would-be*-consecutive forces a mind to stop.

To space out *literally*.

“Let’s *really* space out, not just haze but blast outside our ordinary sphere,” the not-quite-sensical words urge.

It’s unconscious, therefore powerful, increasing our chances of pausing ordinary mind’s chatter.

A body dissolves and there is no memory of its having been undissolving.

Like a bird whose hair got swallowed of its color. It is sizeless, jigsawing red, as if red is the surrogate of all possible places.

A man taps a bird on the window of its head. *He can dissolve with passing away*, someone says.



*Then* I am in my body but not captive in my  
body, because the reflection of my body as  
a “high” black bird got swallowed up.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Bardo Books*, p. 28.

## *Repetition*

From here, one adds the element of repetition. (I almost said “passion.”)

When a word repeats it seems more genuinely to be one’s feeling.

Repetition soothes and instills desire. “Tell me again,” “read it again,” like a record one will play over and over and over, digging the groove inside the soul that played it over and over even before it was born.

Counting, a “take-off”—da-t’-da, da-t’-da, da-t’-da, da-t’-da—it’s in the human gene.

The “hook” of the word creates the safety-of-environment. We need to feel safe to risk slipping through a gap.

Poetry *is* dangerous, after all.

## *Gaps*

The marrow of the style is gaps. Hiatus and lucid gaps.

Lurking behind would be a story verging on revealing itself were the gaps colored in.

The reader gets an invite—“Please, dear reader, color me in”—such that the poem is co-creative, the revelation is co-creative, shaping itself to each individual’s paradigm.

Mother’s warm breath, like a *plate* of breath. Yet it is old breath, having eaten many crackers.

*My breath is a wall*, she whispers from *real* breath, instantly present to birds.

The energy of the animal appears to be experienced internally, its breath (a shadow) withheld in its own stem.

What’s left of mind as a squirrel leaps out?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Mother’s Warm Breath*, p. 79.

Pacing a poem by breaths not only creates an intensity but also a sense of ongoingness.

For what is language and what is breathing, the one propelling and originating the other?

The words elude while the breaths make a philosophy.

Syntax *is* the motion.

Each word has its own syntax,

*Searching Energy*

Each word has a location so that when we hear a word,  
unconsciously we expect for it.

Just naturally, by virtue of the human mind.

We complete what is happening by *listening* it. (We  
HEAR the word into LIFE.)

The mind, activated by a word, allows its affective  
nature to touch it.

Sparrows seem used, uninvented.

Scaly mud, dull sky, colorless birds, remind me of  
my mind.

To see the autumn leaves scatter in my home.  
(The longing they arouse as they lie on the wood  
turning red.)

Is it of my body that they partake?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Watching Slow Flowers*, p. 58.

*Searching Energy + Stumping Mind*

Using words to baffle the mind releases the brilliance  
of the mind.

The language breaks. The mind is stopped.

When, barring understanding, words must instead  
be grasped—

thru Him marigold

summertime

summertime

bluefish

(pokeweed)

WANTED

kept cups<sup>18</sup>

we hear the silence objectified.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Marginalia*, p. 94.

*Disappearing Words*

A word can be fused or rigidified into being  
apparent, its nature frozen in space.

Taken apart, language is reamalgamated, releasing  
the poor word from being so pinned down.

Moderating-the-deathly-state-of-being-signified  
offers it up to a different kind of precision.

After all, the very unreality of compositional realism  
points towards a stylistics that supports vanishing.

*to be sky-full*  
once  
  
a rag of nods  
as the tide  
  
seeps in  
  
the camera  
of her  
(wanting numbers to fit)  
  
now and again  
an instant will finish<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Calliope*, p. 65.

*Semiotics (words as symbols serving to convey meaning)*

Words have a kind of television capacity. They captivate, distract and bring one to a zone of forgetting.

One feels the superficiality, the projection of an “I,” the true or false identity and the meaninglessness, almost, of the very question of falseness.

Using words we fall into a similar stupor—replication where the machine of replication is forgotten or not considered.

Deadened by use we forget that words are signifiers, as we ourselves, outside the experience of “one taste,” forget that this body is a sacred mandala for the victorious ones.

Gertrude Stein noticed. She spent her life as a nurse reinvigorating (resuscitating) flabby (traumatized) words.

Addressing questions of origin and responsibility, meaning grounds the mind in what it thinks it knows.



Refusing that releases the taste of what it cannot.

For poetic meaning accretes, not logically or  
deductively but through a process of settling.

Like a sensation that arises in sleep, of warmth and  
grace and sometimes intense feeling that adds up to,  
say, what a soul-catcher catches.

*Poems of Origin*

“Origin” (poetically) takes place every minute.

Existence, not locale, is the question.

To claim by language the source, this kind of accuracy, to own it with the word while the breathing of the poem (its contraction and widening) claims the paradox of its inexplicability.

Earth overflows. That’s what day breaks.

Do you understand? (Many die confused.)

Wandering through the *bardo*, the endless preserving of fat.

I stare at the heavens just now cracked.

Where in me is the vision of the great ones?<sup>20</sup>

We are the investor and the material word—its resonance of pain, the beauty of its failed dialogue . . .

The dialogue is beautiful *because* it fails, *because* of the impetus at its source.

The double-edge is *pronounced*.

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<sup>20</sup> *DOHĀ*, p. 13.

Reading pain, the synovial fluid yoking word-breath-  
life in perdurable somersault with word-death-life—  
it's the joint venture of the cycle and the seeming  
endlessness of the cycle.

*Multi-dimensionality*

surface beauty  
meaning underlying the surface  
an aha moment of true perception

O'dear no the Prosepine  
to find  
the/  
(for one thing)  
reformation  
in  
hat  
  
curly mountains  
all  
up-to-up  
  
wants/  
to feel  
how  
much  
love  
how  
awakened intense  
ducks<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> unpublished

Here language and sexuality may be confused, the one propelling and originating the other.

Then a continuing sense of the power of sexuality and a deeper respect for its implications.

Finally the realization that desire—to communicate, to touch, to procreate and to exist—are all in fact one breath.

Breath IS creation. IS origin. We do not “contain” God; we *are* God and it is our will to exist and acquire that brings the world and its pain into being.

Acceptance of this responsibility opens the door to intimacy, perhaps our deepest form of grace (the grace of the world to speak intimately to us).

The world speaks its pain and its beauty—to see this in a material way—to simply stand and see.

Poetry is our cane.

*Weight*<sup>22</sup>

“Weight”—not of the poem (the *matter* of the poem)  
but the “hand” of the poet as she writes.

Like a pianist, a poet can bear down, but her bearing  
down is internal.

For language is an instrument that bears weight, dare  
one say, even more sensitively.

Not is good also. Not is a mechanism, like  
picking on a banjo, that to weight, by its nature, is  
impervious.

*China bloodless boy*

people of mast  
here are some

if we are dumb  
if we are dumb

so puffed and  
slobbering to themselves

\*

---

<sup>22</sup> See David L. Sheidlower’s review in Appendix I for further  
elucidation of this concept.

shouting it  
down the mountain

lugging the beast  
back to his people

\*

over hills, over fields  
the moon's condition  
come to pass

*come home stars*  
*lay down your heads*

nailed to the earth  
across the pasture<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Calliope*, p. 14.

*Meter*

Take complexity + staccato.

Or leaving out an expected additional syllable.

At length in kin beatitude

At length in kin beatitude  
must as  
congenial amulet (person).  
Pardon me.  
Cutting the street  
the embankment  
(tourniquet)  
few thoughts reference<sup>24</sup>

A sustained jazzy meter can create a humorous continuum.

It helps one *depend*—hang upon or be contingently attached, even to the un-expressed.

---

<sup>24</sup> *Early Work*, p. 117.



*Rhythm: the internal rhythm of a word and the overall river of words*

Rhythm is the bedrock, the voice, the fundamental principle upon which a poem is built.

Rhythm is the “what” of what’s being said because “how” is what’s being said.

A continuous flow, for example, suggests that thoughts themselves are contiguous though not exactly *causing* one another.

Rhythm keeps the music clean. It *spells* the pulse of cyclical existence.

*tiger tiger*

from Yarlung Valley head

arising from the flower

from the bath

of ancient wood

Tara of the neck

help me through

this birth

draw the word  
through its beauteous  
hole<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Who, a Licchavi*, p. 27.

## *Linkage*

*Renga* (Japanese) are linked poems of varying length launched by a *haiku*.

Often composed in a group setting, each poet jams off the previous poet's offering, grounding by links what otherwise might seem lame.<sup>26</sup>

The best links are invisible. They register, but on a first hit, not as a thought, but a flow.

Though *renga* are associated with *haiku*, the strategy, linkage, works just as well in other settings. (Note the current page and the one previous.)

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<sup>26</sup> For an example, see: Gail Sher and Andrew Schelling, "Hundred-Stanza Renga," *Simply Haiku*, vol. 8, no. 2, Autumn 2010, [simplyhaikujournal.com/autumn2010/rengags.htm](http://simplyhaikujournal.com/autumn2010/rengags.htm).

*Saturation*

To saturate means to fill—to flood, glut, overload. To imbue or suffuse, to impregnate, permeate, steep.

Each word carries its absolute full load *so that* there is little distraction or waste of time (leakage).

The poet stuffs each word into a little canon.

It socks the reader.

## *Density*

Puns, near-puns, verbal internal references, grammatical sleights-of-hand, keep the weave of the poem dense.

Take deliberate mis-use of grammar:

Cleans the smile. Youngs girl.  
Come of its own (alone).<sup>27</sup>

The senseless plural echoes “cleans” and just barely (gently) deflects the “young girl” pixels.

Confined contrasting feelings work similarly.

A woman alone at a large open window  
gazes at the sky. The soft flesh of her arm  
folds around a basket. If she is dead, the  
colors may be alive.<sup>28</sup>

Sometimes a word careens out like a nightmare.

Or the gravitational pull of the poem’s self-referents may become so great that no light-of-import can escape it for a reader.

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<sup>27</sup> unpublished

<sup>28</sup> *Figures in Blue*, p. 1.

The poet cannot cheat.

If she loses track of her “coding system,” her words are at risk of becoming black holes with little to inform them and keep them warm but their own sounds.

*Simplicity*

“Accurate” and “muscular” are two words that describe workable simplicity in a poem.

Its stark feet need to be stable. And flawless.

“Spare but right” holding its karma loosely.

As Hemingway taught, it requires a lot of control.

*o buzzard in the sky*  
invoked the girl  
riding pillion<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *old dri's lament*, p. 62.

*“Equivalents” as Sub-logic or the Forgotten Vocabulary of a Word*

Georgia O’Keefe used the term in this sense:

When she paints a flower she’s not painting a flower but what she *feels* about the flower so if she chooses a line or a color to paint a geranium, for example, she may paint a green square which could be very exact.

Or how Swann in Proust’s *Swann’s Way* always did regard a phrase or musical motif as an idea, an actual conception veiled and impossible to know, but nonetheless distinct, unequal in value or significance.

In the same way words, as for a baby when it talks, behave with powerful though eclipsed intensity.

A doll talks and if she’s a tall doll, *in dependence on a listener*, her presence will not disperse far.

Her body covers her life as if it were a cast.

Mop-like braids fall to her waist. *If I were a Cyclops forging thunderbolts, I too would be being born* she posits.



A man binds his mind so that it doesn't  
scatter. He tucks it between his breasts.  
*How have you left your mind before?*  
someone asks, speaking politely.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *though actually it is the same earth*, p. 38.

### *Restraint*

Language is just language, “ghosted” as one critic of my work said, “by the anxieties of actual experience, ribboned by sexual shadings and innuendo, tense with a pent energy resembling the un-had orgasm . . . so that the hair of the language stiffens and all the tissue is tight with implication unreleased.”

Call it explosive reserve. Or “restraint,” implying holding back, curtailing, lopping, as in a harpsichord, the gush, which by virtue of containment becomes all the more eruptive.

Words are little volcanoes. The vortex, embedded in the word, whirls around picking up particles via energy, time, physical structure, psychology.

Lazy minds sleep. With convention snore.

Disruption wakes—to a fresh start, a new seeing, a quick “Wait! Did you hear *that?*”

*Masks: Catching the Surface with the Essence*

“All profound things love the mask,” said Nietzsche,  
and for poetry masks write the dress-code.

Not this couch hatch (hopes) like food . . . <sup>31</sup>

Masks loosen the mind and make a barrier around  
the word so that its soul escapes to wander freely.

The gravity of time can easily make a word make  
itself into a mask so that we can *tell* it’s . . . what?  
What is it precisely that we say, saying a word?

To satisfy a bias *for* the world, for descriptive writing  
on no matter what descriptive level, or beyond mere  
description to answer instead the riddle of what it is  
to describe—

the where-  
withal of birds  
flown/ from the  
evening and  
settled<sup>32</sup>

“This stanza works and I hardly know

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<sup>31</sup> *Early Work*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> *Early Work*, p. 66.

why. It is vibrant, and multi-dimensional, and very glad and celestial,” commented a reader.

Another: “I’m crazy about it. I can’t even say why—I mean without “where-/withal” it wouldn’t work, and how the rest of the words are seemingly so common, and yet one has created something extraordinarily perfect and beautiful. Like a haiku yes.”

The “I hardly know why . . .”

Actually masks work by disburdening. The frontal lobes relax releasing a different kind of intelligence.

Relevance becomes implicit. It drifts around latching onto that or this or something that never happened.

Curiosity takes a stab. “Oh *I* know!” If there’s an *I*, of course, we already know it doesn’t, really, know anything of importance.

The journey, however, self-replicating and earnest, can be immensely revealing, transformational, and indeed “profound,” to borrow Nietzsche’s word.

The face beneath the mask may wear another mask but anyway will glow from the mere care of the person.

## *Titles*

A title may name a poem but also spring out—be energized by—the poem.

Or a title can *take place* in a poem unexpectedly, as if stumbled over.

It can give information, create atmosphere,

commodious dream to wherefore thou internal

to beam/

to is

this

sun<sup>33</sup>

“Here the stupendous length of the title is equal (in some cosmic suchness value) to the brevity of the poem. In fact the title partially *makes* the poem through the sharp contrast of gloomy depths and translucent light,” one reader explained.

bliss and in her cabbage-petal fall the arch-meal’s bitterly, another title, is similar.

savannahs of the new world, another title, is similar.

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<sup>33</sup> *Early Work*, p. 99.

Tricking you into the poem, a title may double cross

You avail yourself to language whose very nature  
double crosses.

Colloquialisms, almost sloppy in the midst of  
intense precision, surprise and slip you *between* the  
cracks whose rough edges you might otherwise skirt  
around.

These “lines you can trust” signify conclusions  
ultimately not deducible.

unravel Jacob

prairies

presses

(juice

of

flowers)

hovering

like

bread

falling

around

light

lowering  
    steeples  
of  
thought<sup>34</sup>

A title may be inviting but not always inviting.

Sometimes they have the stereoscopic effect of enlarging dimensions, lifting one out of what takes place.

A title may point away but at the same time may itself be the subject.

A title may point to a place unlocatable in the poem.

Setting up a poetic shiftiness.

The language proceeds with a duplicate motion that consumes and sucks the wily words back in and you end up, or start out, when the title does it too, in a void.

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<sup>34</sup> unpublished

## The *Way* of the Living Word

### *The Body of the Word*

The ordeal of a word is like trying to sleep with God.

The exchange is its offering.

We enter and awaken to our death and resurrection,  
if we're still enough, ripened enough.

The felt word, its intelligence, its thrall—inherent in  
its body is the *clear light* shining.

Take the word “spoon” with its energetic “p,” its  
soothing “o’s,” the soft sound of its “n.” The “s” of  
course risks getting tangled in the “p,” but it’s a good  
word, easy to use, respectable.

The sensual, obdurate “thing-ness” of its shape stands  
in its opacity purely for itself, leading to no other  
conclusion.

It doesn't ask to go further. It *refuses* to go further.

Saw (too) to  
cling here  
chessmen<sup>35</sup>

is its own explication.

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<sup>35</sup> (As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem, unpaginated.



*The Mind of the Word*

Reaching for narrative, undermining narrative, taken alone, a word is a kind of narrative.

For time in a poem is discrete, and time in a word lets loose back to its own etymological pratfalls.

The vision may occur before imagination.

The event may sound prior to its happening.

The insouciance of a word . . .

The royalty of a word . . .

Eros lives in every word.

Through the eye of a word we see. (The *word* looks, from the vantage point of its mind.)

Disjuncture is its power, unhinged from meaning, bouncing off artifacts synonymous with an absence.

In a farrago of words, each word-moment is connected to all the others, the more seemingly unrelated, the stronger the psychic thread.

A woman carries a jug dexterously embroidered on silk. The woman's skin shines like the interior pink of a river.

The dimensions of the jug's magenta is implicit yet exacting.

*Out* is not a direction but an aspect of conference around the jug's battered aggregates.

Bringing yellow *out*, where *out* is a structure of color *and* light, intensifies *out*, as if its DNA changes.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *though actually it is the same earth*, p. 23.

A word reveals a healthy lust for the innards of its survival.

One wishes you up into a vacuum where there is no placement, no resolution, nothing that can be returned to.

Its performance leaves no trace (though there is something so familiar).

Held there in your wanting, you reach, you stretch and the stretching opens and deepens what you feel so that *almost* becomes an invitation and at the same time an entrance to what finally gives way to another name.

*The Transmission of a Word*

The Path of each word decouples its identity.

Different contexts feature different *parts*.

Also different *paths*. The Path of a word has trails that carry the word even into the midst of the bodies of other words.

Thus we have the word, its figuration in a different word, and the meditation in our mind of the marriage of the two thereafter.

Marriage, a sacrament, includes an oath made with words.

For God and Word are the same, plucked from the same stream.

However remote, something of that consecration lingers—as we are using words, contemplating words—as Ted Hughes' phrase “achieved human voice” ratifies.

His heightened relationship with words elevates this awareness, but for all who care, all who attend, the transmission is there along with the respect of the word.

## Late Work

Late work (the poetry I began writing in 2014) addresses a different part of the brain than my earlier work.

The element of space directs itself no longer to wisdom mind but to lesser-exalted areas of the self, not necessarily pre-verbal.

That human beings are primarily relational takes on new significance.

Formerly silence was *in* the word and *was* the word (introverted). Now it is also referential (extroverted).

New Year's Eve  
listen—  
snow is falling<sup>37</sup>

Sensation becomes memory.

What erupts may be from the reptilian brain but may also stem from more highly evolved areas.

Meaning extends beyond the word into clusters of

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<sup>37</sup> *Pale Sky*, p. 10.

words, sentences and remainders after the sentences have passed.

The mind of the woman is warm, her sweaters and chickens and all the places on the boat . . .

“Hello,” Unn offers.

“What?” shouts the woman.<sup>38</sup>

Meaning finally is useful. Before, it not only was not useful, it obstructed what was useful.

Before there was the boat. Now there’s the other shore.

The *device*—thinking you know what it means—becomes authenticated by the text—you *do* know what it means.

She wondered if the fact that things ceased to exist in her meant that they ceased to exist.

Does time cease to exist or does it flow parallel to what looks like one’s existence?

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<sup>38</sup> *Sunny Day, Spring*, p. 3.

What is one's existence? What is the  
relation between time and one's existence?<sup>39</sup>

It means what it means to you, but meaning is  
*intended* whereas in the earlier work, the flow *toward*  
meaning was simply bait.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ezekiel*, p. 78.

## Appendix I

ANDREW SCHELLING

*Gail Sher: Poetry 1981-2006*

A review essay

I first met Gail Sher in the early nineteen-eighties when we were both living in Berkeley. I'd already read her earliest published poetry and heard friends speak about her practice of both Buddhism and writing. In a modest way she was a legend among local poets & Zen students. When I actually met her, she was finishing up a book of bread recipes, an activity less surprising in those days than it might seem now.

The story about Gail's poetry was that she'd begun to write her tough, multi-layered, flint-like poems, often in series, while a student at Zen Center's Tassajara Mountain retreat. She had continued to write as a daily discipline after returning to the East Bay where she dwelt on the far fringes of the energetic language poetry crowd. The earliest events she and I appeared at together were conversations about poetry and Buddhist practice—once in San Francisco, once



at Green Gulch Zen Center near Muir Beach. To my imagination though, she remained a figure of Tassajara.

Tassajara lies in one of those cañados that in summer visiting season crackles with tough, aromatic brush—as well as manzanita & poison oak—deep in the mountains inland from Monterey. The site, along a boulder strewn creek, was first known to native peoples for its healing hot springs. You can only readily get there during the dry season, & only with a serviceable car, standard transmission, to take you seven miles uphill, then seven precipitous miles down a harrowing dirt road. The road twists along a valley wall held in place by the roots of dwarf oaks. When I'd visit in the seventies and eighties, I went in my big, square '64 Pontiac, which burnt through its brakes the first time down. From then on the car stayed at China Camp, a hilltop site with primitive facilities. Seven miles down to Tassajara by foot—bathe in the creek, drink tea generously provided by the Zen Students, buy a loaf of Tassajara's renowned bread, sit zazen in the zendo—then trudge seven miles back to the clatter of crickets. On one of those

trips I heard of a poet who had taken to a daily practice of writing, and did it as a solitary discipline. So different from the gregarious poets I knew in the Bay Area!

When I found Gail's books, I imagined her having stepped from a Japanese Noh play. Her poems, sharpened by rigorous Buddhist discipline—& not to everybody's taste—grabbed me instantly. They were tough, refreshingly hard-edged, full of the natural world—constructed of bits and pieces of mineral, insect, bark, summer grass. They could cry out from the page in several languages at once, with English functioning (I thought) like a piece of steel to strike the spark. They felt classical. Despite their wild turns of phrasing, fox barks & cricket clicks, under the surface they showed a sensibility that was refined, educated, attentive to natural detail, & enamored of the chipped, the asymmetric, the rustic. They put me in mind of the writers of Japan's Heian court, the best of whom were women. I still hear echoes of Murasaki Shikibu or Ono no Komachi when I open Gail's books.

My ear had been tuned to Modernist rhythms

& syntax by Pound's *Cantos* and his haunting translation of Noh plays. I'd been schooled in the compressed poems of Lorine Niedecker and the Objectivists, had started to collect the crisp haiku-inflected translations of American Indian poems done by Frances Densmore, and gotten first-hand know-how of Asian poetry through the mustard-crackling syllables of Sanskrit. When I found Gail's poems, they became instant companions. I knew she was up to something special. (*As on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem* was probably the book that first showed me how my own generation's often extreme experiments with language—cracking words apart & recombining syllables or sentences in ways that carried ear & mind to completely new realms—could be more than politically radical. They could be ecologically radical, spiritually radical.

I remember many poems by Philip Whalen & Diane di Prima also written at Tassajara, and maybe some by Norman Fischer or Pat Reed. Once on the twisty, uphill walk back to China Camp through burnt-over oaks—frightening wildfire had raced through in '77 or '78—ghost faces leapt out where the firefighter's

axes had slashed through scorched trunks and exposed bright inner wood. I composed a lengthy poem (thankfully lost long ago) to capture the California landscape with its Zen center, lizards, and rattlesnakes. Of all the writing Tassajara's inspired, though, Gail Sher's must be the most fully generated out of that canyon, its geothermal forces, its healing hot springs.

Gail has worked with, & been instrumental in naturalizing to our North American continent, several Asian poetic traditions. This is something only a Left Coast or Pacific Rim poet could do with ease, and a direct if invisible lineage runs through her from the Far East. She has worked haiku and its linked-verse cousin renku. She has written an autobiographical account of her Buddhist training in haibun form. More recently, familiarity with yoga practice has drawn her to India's musical tradition, and the outcome of this was the serial poem RAGA. In conversation with Tibetan Buddhism, she also wrote *DOHĀ*, a book modeled on Tibetan songs of devotion and instruction.

Every plant, wild animal, watershed, well-crafted

building, every poem or human being, holds a quality that is the root of its life and spirit. This quality is quite sharp, objective, wise. It is also creative and fluid so cannot be caught or described. Matsuo Basho found this spirit to animate haiku, lyric poems, the tea ceremony, archery. It runs through all of Gail Sher's poetry—loose, alive, relaxed, content with imperfection, winding around an inward mystery. Her writing reveals the finely edged relationship between ourselves and our surroundings. When I go to her poetry I do it the way I hike into the mountains or up a gorge, or for that matter step into a temple or meditation hall. I find things fully alive there. Not opinions, ideas, notions—just the wild spirit of living things.

What is the natural habitat of North American poetry if not the great ecosystem of the Small Press? An ecosystem comprised of energy pathways, migration corridors, nutrient exchanges. It is alive with life & death chases, sweeping unpredictable weather patterns, and acts of breath-taking generosity. Gail's poems saw light here: Rosmarie & Keith Waldrop's Burning Deck Press, Matt & Sarah

Correy's Rodent Press, Joey Simas's Moving Letters. But the world of publishing got rougher in the 1990's (absorption of corporate publishing houses into media empires, overthrow of distributors who handle small presses). One response has been for poets to consolidate their resources. Gail's poetry has moved to a new home, Night Crane Press.

Small and micro presses serving the San Francisco Bay Area have taken totem animals for a long time. White Rabbit, Grey Fox, Coyote Books. Turtle Island fits in too. Now Night Crane, with its whiff of transient life, is collecting Gail Sher's poetry into an online edition. This is a wonderful gathering. Much in these books will be rough going, though, even for seasoned readers. Tibetan words, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Japanese. Syllables cobbled into seed-like stanzas that don't easily crack. Of course poetry has always been hard to crack. "Don't follow in the steps of the old masters," said one old master, "seek what they sought." What a hard lesson.

Fourth of July Valley

May 31, 2006

DAVID L. SHEIDLOWER

*Miming the Phrase*

Review of *(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem* by Gail Sher (San Francisco: Square Zero Editions, 1982).

Gail Sher places an incredible weight in each phrase of this book. They are phrases mostly, the discreet & seemingly incomplete units which make up this short book. I find the weight in the phrases, not on them; they are not burdened, rather each has its own volume & density, can attract the phrases around them or be inert and integral. Take the phrase: “Tubers & iron/even to prepare/this.” From their natural state, both the vegetable & the mineral are prepared by heat, in that sense they’re even (or equal). Very dense consistencies also. Then the “this” which, locating only itself (i.e. not subordinate as in “this thing here”) pulls down on the three words above it & the question is not “even to prepare this what?,” but can the middle phrase double itself? Rather than one incomplete phrase, there are two phrases here, with “even” meaning “as well” and “equal” simultaneously.

A line by itself reads: "Mime is first"; and yes the words are, at first reading, gestures of phrases. Like a mime (on a still, empty stage) pretending to be thrown forward by the short stop of a bus he's not riding on, these phrases imitate the motion of phrases in a context, but are surrounded by white space & make their own sense: "Dawns or/parson."

The next line is "Or go god," That's a real choice in this poem which invites speculation on whether or not religious characters (specific & general): "monk", "god", "nun", "Christ", "the Moslem"), religious actions (vowing, chanting, renouncing, gracing) & religious imagery ("the/shepherd", "The wooly flesh") can maintain their religious meanings in such undevotional as well as non-moralistic phrases. And of course they can if you let them.

The poem is not didactic, offers choices. Hence, the only pronunciation is a handful of parentheses at the beginning which sets the mood for the optional: "Saw (too) to/cling here"; take or leave either "to" or "too" or both. Some phrases end with "this" or begin with "As," attracting surrounding phrases (but there is no syllogistic sense which definitely connects any



two phrases and hence the connections are optional).  
The poem offers the choice between action and  
being: “A rung or yelling,” “The grit or/hear”; but  
wonderfully & conscientiously blurs the distinction  
between the two “As hover from the/elbows is  
something/growing.” And so the distinctions  
between mime and the actual are blurred.

Berkeley, 1982

GAIL SHER

Letter to the Editor of *The San Francisco Review of Books* (June 1979) <sup>40</sup>

Dear Mr. Nowicki,

Last night I read the following in a story called “The thrower-away” by Heinrich Boll:

...I am making an intensive study of a young man from my neighborhood who earned his living as a book reviewer but at times was unable to practice his profession because he found it impossible to undo the twisted wire tied around the parcel, and even when he did find himself equal to this physical exertion, he was incapable of penetrating the massive layer of gummed paper with which the corrugated paper is stuck together. The man appears deeply disturbed and has now gone over to reviewing the books unread and placing the parcels on his bookshelves without

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<sup>40</sup> My first published writing defends another writer, Barabara Einzig, but it somehow describes the kind of writing I end up doing myself thirty years later in my “late work.”

unwrapping them. I leave it to the reader's imagination to depict for himself the effect of such a case on our intellectual life.

and wondered if this could be the problem in the style of the reviewer of "Some Problems of Style" in Barbara Einzig's *Disappearing Work* and if so, should we be glad or sorry that so much potential is being "thrown away" as it were. Perhaps something could be done to help the matter along, for example the reviewer might appreciate receiving an unwrapped copy of the above mentioned book. I myself would be happy to provide him with one. He could then have the pleasure of easily reading it and I'm sure upon so doing he will notice immediately that though indeed novel it is not a novel at all, though full of precision it has no chronology (the first section is later than the second), it has no "protagonist" and is not "just another" anything but an entirely unique (not story) but brilliantly executed expose of the unconscious male or female.

Apologies are in order. They would do wonders for the fast failing reputation of SFRB not to mention the

alleviating effect they might have, if it's not too late,  
on our intellectual life.<sup>41</sup>

San Francisco

May 8, 1979

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<sup>41</sup> The editor replied, “Whether or not Einzig’s book is categorized as a novel, my opinion remains that it is flat and too low-key to arouse the reader’s interest. . . .”

## Appendix II

### *A Personal Chronology of External Life Circumstances*

1942: Born in St. Louis, Missouri's Jewish Hospital.

1947-53: Elementary school in University City, a suburb of St. Louis.

1954-57: Hanley Junior High School in University City.

1958-60: University City Senior High School (avid reader, diary writer and aspiring pianist studying with Harold Zabrach).

1960-61: University of Florida, Gainesville (study piano, music history, composition, theory).

1961-62: Hebrew University, Jerusalem (study Hebrew, Torah and piano at the Jerusalem Academy of Music).

1962-64: BA in English at Northwestern University. Receive Ford Foundation Fellowship to study linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin.

1964: Choose instead to study Middle English at the University of California, Berkeley; meet Arthur Weiner, fellow graduate student in English and reader for the poet Thom Gunn.

1965: Arthur and I marry.

1966: Receive a secondary teaching credential from U.C. Berkeley.

1966-68: Enjoy teaching high school English at Ygnacio Valley High and Pleasant Hill High; win "Teacher of the Year" Award from three education faculties (Stanford, Berkeley, San Francisco State). Have a harpsichord built and begin studying harpsichord with a very gifted teacher, Jean Nandi, a student of Gustav Leonhardt.<sup>42</sup>

November 1968: Arthur and I separate; I begin sitting zazen at the Berkeley Zendo (part of the San Francisco Zen Center).

Summer 1969: Attend Summer Practice Period at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center with Suzuki-roshi.

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<sup>42</sup> For more on Jean Nandi's unconventional, inspiring life, see *Unconventional Wisdom: A Memoir* by Jean Nandi, downloadable at [www.elverhoj.org/archives/nandi.html](http://www.elverhoj.org/archives/nandi.html).

Fall 1969: Move into the Berkeley Zendo; and, encouraged by Jean Nandi, begin a second BA, in music, at UC Berkeley.

1971: Move to San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in order to practice Zen full-time; ordained a lay disciple of Suzuki-roshi.

1980: Leave Zen Center after eleven years, realizing that my practice needs to be *writing*.<sup>43</sup> I had already abandoned the formal practice of music, consciously dedicating my musical ability to writing, selling my harpsichord and donating the proceeds to purchase a great temple bell, crafted in Japan, for Zen Center.

1980: I move to an apartment on Haight Street and begin writing daily, publishing poems in small literary journals. Become friends with Beau

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<sup>43</sup> *Moon of the Swaying Buds* describes how I came to this decision. Through Zen I discover “Yes Practice”: only doing those things I can say Yes to with my whole body and mind. By then, however, “I am through with Zen Center. I need to define my own regime. Zen Center has had it with me anyway. I am told privately that unless my attitude changes, I will not be accepted for Fall Practice Period. Indeed, my attitude has changed but not in the direction that would pique my interest in Fall Practice Period” (*Moon of the Swaying Buds*, 2001, p.392).

Beausoleil, Leslie Scalapino and Merry Benezra.

1982: Move to Etna St. in Berkeley; work as personal assistant for Billy & Alice Shapiro; continue writing daily and begin publishing books of poetry with small, independent presses.

1982-1993: Yoga-based meditation practice with Self Realization Fellowship. I am attracted to this heart-based practice, which complements the mind-based Zen I knew; I especially appreciate that this community, founded by Paramahansa Yogananda in the 1920s, is led by women.

1985-1990 Complete MA in Clinical Psychology at John F. Kennedy University; meet Brendan Collins, former Benedictine monk, photographer, teacher and psychologist.

1990: Brendan and I marry; I begin private practice as psychotherapist; continue publishing with small presses.

1995: Meet Adzom Paylo Rinpoche, meditation master in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and begin a concentrated study of



Tibetan Buddhism; complete the *Longchen Nyingthig Ngondro* under his direction and guidance. This form of Buddhism brings together the heart *and* mind practice I have long sought.

1997-continuing: After the closing of so many small independent presses, Brendan and I establish Night Crane Press; I continue writing early every morning, working as a psychotherapist, practicing Tibetan Buddhism, and enjoying living with Brendan.

*An Internal History of My Relationship with Language*

“The literary persona who enacts the poet’s struggle can be glimpsed, always, in one early work that Ted Hughes calls the ‘first,’ which contains, in a single image, ‘a package of precisely folded, multiple meanings.’ The origin of this image is a trauma, usually hidden from the writer’s consciousness, that partakes in a wholly personal way of some destructive aspect of cultural life.”<sup>44</sup>

The dates are vague. We live on an army base in North Carolina where my father, Charles Sher, is stationed.

While he is overseas, I live with my mother, her three volatile sisters, her absent father, nervous-breakdown-prone mother, and a slightly older, noisy and aggressive male cousin. In this household—I am two—I begin stuttering and am diagnosed with

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<sup>44</sup> Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath—A Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 245.

a “nervous breakdown.” The symptoms—stuttering, hypervigilance and nonadaptability to change—are consistent with recent research on pre-school children in traumatic, disruptive, unpredictable environments.

I am removed to the apartment of my paternal grandmother who says to my mother, “You can live here but I’m not paying for her milk.”

With his impressive purple heart my war veteran father returns. “Honey, that’s your father.” “No it’s not. *This* is my father,” I say, pointing to his photograph. I believe I am four.

A primary memory is sitting on an outside step striving toward collecting all my words and feeling extremely frustrated that I do not know how to write.

My hysterical mother and war-traumatized father fight constantly (about money and sexual transgressions on both parts).

I act out in elementary school. Feel very very ugly. Take refuge in reading the interesting books provided by my mother.

I rock in bed, at my desk in school, in my rocking chair when I am reading.

Begin to adjust socially in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, become a cheerleader and am liked by boys, but I cannot think analytically and only do average in my classes, which feels not only humiliating but somehow wrong (incorrect).

In 10<sup>th</sup> grade an English teacher compliments what she calls a “parallel structure” that I use inadvertently. On the spot I decide to become a writer but am discouraged by my father who says, “Oh everyone wants to be *that*.”

Thinking and writing analytically continue to be problems all the way through graduate school, though at Northwestern I devised a way to pass written exams, receive my B.A. and a Ford Foundation Fellowship to study linguistics.

Meanwhile in high school, in an outside study, I test at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile in math and language, and have been in a longitudinal study for gifted children ever since. (I am now 73.)

Oddly (to me) I feel I “belong” in the gifted group yet consistently my drifting mind and grades do not back that up.

Eventually I have the following thought: “I CAN’T see white like everyone else, but the black I see is not nothing. It is rich and full of music.” I begin to feature it in my stabs at writing (having still the sense that I do not know what I’m doing, but liking the result).

The thought that it is something is a turning point.

Based on recent research on the neurological effect of trauma, my frontal lobes probably were dysfunctional, but my implicit memories and awareness were not dysfunctional. Since this is all I have, I lavish my attention on THAT.

I discover that I am hyper-aware of aspects about language that most people ignore.

With years of disciplined Buddhist practice behind me, I force myself to write from the *right* side of my brain and discover a whole new relationship with words.

In retrospect I feel that were it not for the trauma—whose effect was at the forefront through my thirties, into my forties and to some extent is *still* present—I would not have seen, certainly not so clearly, the contents of the space brightened by a shut-down left frontal cortex.

I feel grateful for the passion that insisted on a way, and eventually found a way, and made it *my* WAY.

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<sup>45</sup> Contains the following out-of-print chapbooks written between 1996-2002: *Like a Crane at Night* (1996); *One Bug ... One Mouth ... Snap!* (1997); *Saffron Wings* (1998); *Fifty Jigsawed Bones* (1999); *Lines: The Life of a Laysan Albatross* (2002).



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