

Post45
Bernadette Mayer

"Just to distract you like the inside": a correspondence wrapped up in Bernadette Mayer's poetry

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07.27.21



PRINT

THE COLOR RED

"as each moment of love is past I fear so heartily the loss of it
wishing it only to begin again as quickly as the fire becomes the
vivid red you cannot see but only in see in those bright tones

that could be any other color, I love you then in bright red, a color becomes out of necessity a denial . . . " ¹

I want to think about this as an instance of *vascular imaginary*: an expression of material or abstract process through the entanglements, circuits, and rhythms of the body, especially the nervous, vascular, and endocrine systems. Like when Lisa Robertson declares at the end of her poem, "The Seam": "Everything will be a hormone." ² The unconditional tense of this *will be* feels like the gift of what takes effect inside you, loosening seams and ribbons and threads. A vascular imaginary is one of conflagration: a metabolic impulse that subsumes, transforms, and spreads in memory and the unraveling moment of lyric.

"There is a past each of us is given, no not given as if it's wrapped and then presented but given in exchange for a moment of silence in the present." ³ Can you unwrap a book in silence — I don't think you can, you're always going to wake up the sentences, crinkling. Bernadette Mayer's poem "I Imagine Things" begins with "It's a fine time to think it" ⁴ and I'm wondering about that "it," which is the wrapper on poetry that can't be unpeeled from the poetry itself. I'm not talking about craft, more like arts & crafts. A lot of us have taken a *hands-on* approach to work lately: people sewing masks, potting plants, wringing their hands at the news. Hands on keyboards. We had to *take stock* of the present, not presented, but traded for this confrontation with loss. Which was anticipatory and latent, which was the strange weight of what had happened to bring "us" to "this." Nobody handed me a story; there was this moment to take, and could I see through it.

I'm talking about opacity versus transparency. I mean, to hold words up to the light and believe they were otherwise. To play at the creases in that fine, semi-transparent film we call daily life. Blink too close and it's gone. The light? Ever since I tore the cellophane off my reissue of Mayer's *Memory* (1975), I have been looking for the luminous in things. Alice Notley says "Almost everyone is luminous." ⁵ I'm starting to believe that silence is the luminous thing in the present. I look to you.

NO HARD FEELINGS

" . . . and I'll be prone
Or likely to succumb to what is newly warmed or unfrozen
In the air as if the space between me and other people that
Was generated in coldness for this part of a year past
Or became accustomed to the cold's distance now suppurates or
matures
And we become closer in the freedom of the thaw or thereafter
. . . And I have to lie down or get under the blanket to sweat for a
night" 6

There's a film —
not that sort —
one of those supposedly heart-warming
cloying British films like *Billy Elliott*,
or *Brassed Off*, or *The Full Monty*,
where a character goes into their shed &
wraps themselves in cling film
to sweat themselves crazy
in an effort to *get in shape*.

By which I mean *ripped*.

When I was a teenager,
plagued by shape-related anxieties,
I hoarded cling film in my room
to try the same thing, and at night
started wrapping.

I remember it felt strange — shrink
wrapping myself. Like a parcel to be
shipped or sat on a shelf and then
ripped open by, what, a glance?

An invitation? A touch?
Like Bern Porter's poem:
"The sugar is packaged
The salt is packaged
The pepper is packaged"
and so on until
"I am packaged
Pray tell
How can I ever
open myself?" [1](#)

If anything poems are heart-wrapping,
heart-unwrapping in equal measure.
Poems as rustling, squeaking,
more or less tight, or ripped, or
crunchy, poems as the sound of
wrapping / unwrapping, little
tears and cuts and glues, and plastic.

In the film-inspired shrink wrap —
I feel like olive oil was involved
somehow — maybe it
was just the sweat that stewed
a little so had the texture of a light,
heavily filtered oil which I'm now
romanticizing, looking back, through
associations and shame of
a different kind, not extra-virgin.

I had the same feeling as you
with the shrink-wrapped *Memory*.
I was like Johnny Thunder —
"you can't put your arms around a —"
but also like the poem in *Works & Days*
called "Enter if You Dare":

"An affiliative gesture
Elephants put the tips
Of their trunks
In each other's mouths And swirl them about" [8](#)

WILD I WANT

"And now I seem to have to write [. . .] but I can't feel good no matter what I try I can't feel good eating [. . .] I want inside to be outside and not knowing that, there's nothing better about not-the-person, nothing seems to predominate here, the fucking time passes, I'm not exactly free to write cause no one's here." [2](#)

Filling each other with poems
here's another
I want, I want
like Eileen Myles: "a poem says 'I Want'" [10](#)
or "I woke up in / the dreaming
poem of the day [. . .]
I would begin. Soon I would want something" [11](#)
needing the poem to know
our reality burns already inside us
and to have this mess on the outside
more like an appetite
to risk a hot red splash
and not being dominant
wanting to say *cellophane*, does it stay
thousands of years the same
or decompose
in the tender landfills of
next century
were that possible

So to tip our
sheet into song, that something
would not process
and only be ashamed of that
going back to the land
that is the poem
as I was carrying

a kind of formlessness, dropping
 the colors of words on this
 to make of repertoire
 the sense that "poetry's
 a mess, let it stay that way." [12](#)
 And the land I pulled, declarative
 from my bellyache
 was looking back at itself
 and lowering into parallel
 like Chelsey Minnis writes in *Poemland*:

"This is like crying while trying on different outfits . . .
 [. . .]
 This is when you look at the dinner table and start crying . . .
 [. . .]
 This is 'ow, ow, ow, ow'" [13](#)

which is to make
 of your mouth in wanting to eat
 but can't, and slipping
 one or more kinds of dress on yourself
 or collecting tears in Ziplocs

I try to lie down on
 smelling petrichor
 and a substance that sticks to itself
 and a tremble to make
 that empty shape with your lips
 as if to mispronounce "climate"
 in that half-rhyme, "ow"
 and gather this up, so

"I can make piles
 Of autumn leaves, wood, yarn, snow
 And cover them with a tarp" [14](#)

what I want to say of these diaries:
Works & Days, Studying Hunger, Memory
 I mean, curling the last line
 a wildness

up into a bunch of light for you
and squeezing tears, here
is a gift
in motion, not touching
where the ribbon was cut
to open a territory
and shatter the door
except to make this poem the land
we share

"The water is very deep. On an edge of the island they give out presents which we unwrap, arrange on boards. Some things don't stand up." ¹⁵

BENCH GUM

". . . not that you're going to be one of those poets who only talks about fears, or one of those who have given poetry, old modern poetry as they say, a reputation for being something psychological or even confessional, it is all so false . . ." ¹⁶

I like what John Wieners said about wanting to write the most embarrassing thing. Writing the thing usually kept under wraps or behind a leaf. "Can I say that?" When I go boxing my hands get wrapped in long cotton ribbons by Eddie the trainer in bandages like a ritual like I'm a mummy being made into a memory, before I put the gloves on, and the gloves are always a little damp inside like reading someone else's reading of a poem or reading someone else's poem out loud. I never know if they're damp from my last visit or someone else's exertions but I don't

mind. It's impersonally intimate either way:
someone else or past me. What is scary is I quite like it.

I loved your including her *piles of autumn leaves*.
I want to make a moustache out of leaves
and grass (not leaves of grass that's another story),
from my local park and then from out
the middle of it espouse how much I love
the disco pigeons, weedy bouquets,
oh did you try a green cappuccino? You
just put your mouth to the ground
and slurp if that doesn't sound
too gross. I fantasize about
the gum under benches —
peculiar beyond cognition —
these hard unsweet sweets,
a sort of cough remedy difficult
to prize, impossible to metabolize.

Grass stains are gorgeous.
When people start crying in a poem or
a park it usually means they haven't
wanted to cry at home which
probably makes them cry all the
more but thank fuck for parks and poems
where there are grass stains and other
stains and slugs. Hi slugs! Welcome to this
correspondence which is a bit like a park. I wish.

"The nights let us have leaves

we have them

the leaves have let us" [17](#)

That's basically all I wish,
to slurp at grass and mud until
green in the jaw and gritty
and hanging around looking
like a buttercup wouldn't melt

in an armpit, not a hair out of
place.

"there's nothing more to say
my hair's braided like a family
i took off, it was fun, i loved it" [18](#)

Sometimes I feel a desire to talk,
so strong, like being microwaved without a cover,
what you've wanted to say just splatters

everywhere over the door, the spinning plate,
the sides, and the microwave won't work but still
sometimes I feel a desire to talk,

and there's a shelf in my car where
if you put a phone it just charges, no cable,
but what you've wanted to say just splatters.

That's what it feels like wrapping up in
Bernadette Mayer's poetry, an intense
desire sometimes to correspond and talk.

What you wrote about curling the last line
into a bunch of light and squeezing tears, . . .
what I wanted to say about it just splatters,

the word "duct," circulating in air conditioning,
anatomy and also the word "ductus" from linguistics,
for an intermittent desire in writing and talk,
where what you've wanted to say just flows.

"This is a poem I keep beginning & ending at different hours
of the day & night
My mind's been drifting a lot lately, maybe it's the weather" [19](#)

GRASS CITY

"I loved your answer about eclogues because, not sure what an eclogue has been, I wrote one called amatory and it was about three kinds of grass and lying in them — to make the leap between obsession and knowledge and a new form would make me high" [20](#)

I've got this blade
 between my teeth, what civic speech will be
 can't speak
 for something lush, sharp, or cool, it's stuck
 and becoming me too. In her poem "Grass"
 Kathleen Fraser writes "The grass is
 my second skin" and "Each blade
 the entrance to the grass city.
 Lie in it. Open slowly to it." [21](#)
 Wrapping myself away from me,
 I like to be instructed sometimes:
 remember to exist. A lotus.
 ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
 Time passes in the poem
 and prescribes us
 dentistry heaven,
 Bernadette's grass is smudged on my arms like
 you said about crying, it's all this desire to talk
 or asking *will you take these*
away from me? I hear the rotary
 blades of faraway turbines at night.
 Amatory grasses stir in grass city.
 Do we qualify as a pastoral dialogue
 is like asking *will you be my support bubble*
before this pops? O eclogue,
 the most embarrassing thing is that
 there is no history in grass city
 only the imploded pain
 you recall deposited
 a properly vaulted heart.

One summer I did nothing
 but listen to Sky Ferreira's cover of "Voices Carry"

in the dark, hush hush
and part of the sweet time
grasses parting, words are dew.

Now I'm learning between
lying around in the parklands, musing
a new form in slug line: what's important
to know that "There is a time for everything
Like getting high higher highest
Here in beautiful aloneness forest
The surf remembers another form
of revolution." ²² Up in arms
the glass-blown ocean caress
of shimmer feeling
folds between trees
and I hold you.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sometimes tears are scary.
My blood is running athletic
through emotion mulch;
I don't know how
labor is stored
and turned in phrasal surf, this over
curl of a line
drops gosh into blue
and the increment sings
to get high writing the eclogue, pressure cook
of let's not speak about global heating.

That landlords dehisce speech
into something like finance
and my foot bleeds *oops* all over the carpet;
"if someone doesn't change into an animal,
we won't be saved" ²³ seems right.

The body in cling film is close to a movie

Here in cheap nature reserve,
"Simply going slow day after day
doesn't always work" ²⁴ you know
I felt sick at the gates of grass city

having rushed here alone
to call you back alive
from the prairie, lowering
knowledge from another grief music
who left this open
[]
It's only the heat . . . *voices carry* . . .
another lyric tumbleweed
unlocking the sun . . .
"there is different gibberish for each of the emotions" [25](#)
and everyone who has ever cried in a park
or a poem knows this, you only have to listen
to the leaf-quoting blue jays
fold this song
cyanic come
into "the orgone envelope of the world" [26](#)
later to let out what happened first.

"This begins where mourning leaves off and I'm the one and I'm
the one writing on lines reduced to writing on lines: the past is
colorful and that is memory full of color and bright lines, design,
and careful colored record, so, where are you?" [27](#)

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