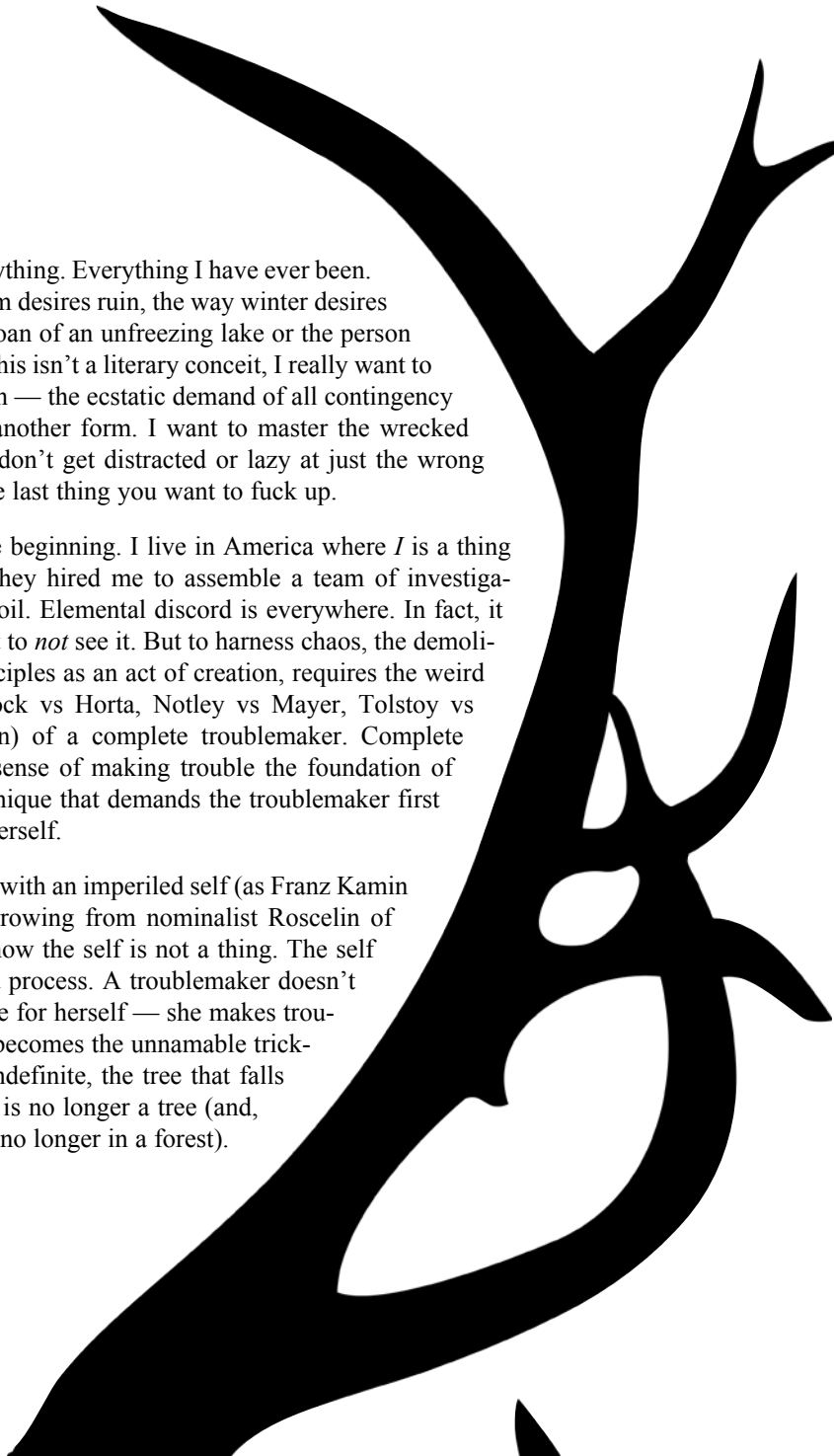




*Ruin
and
Desire*

*An essay
by Brendan Lorber*



I desire to ruin everything. Everything I have ever been. It isn't hard. All I am desires ruin, the way winter desires spring. The wild groan of an unfreezing lake or the person falling through it. This isn't a literary conceit, I really want to get with annihilation — the ecstatic demand of all contingency for liberation into another form. I want to master the wrecked telemetry so that I don't get distracted or lazy at just the wrong moment. Ruin is the last thing you want to fuck up.

But let's start at the beginning. I live in America where *I* is a thing that needs a job. They hired me to assemble a team of investigators to dig for turmoil. Elemental discord is everywhere. In fact, it requires more effort to *not* see it. But to harness chaos, the demolition of all first principles as an act of creation, requires the weird discipline (and Spock vs Horta, Notley vs Mayer, Tolstoy vs Turgenov mediation) of a complete troublemaker. Complete in the *ontological* sense of making trouble the foundation of existence — a technique that demands the troublemaker first makes trouble for herself.

The secret of living with an imperiled self (as Franz Kamin might frame it, borrowing from nominalist Roscelin of Compègne) is to know the self is not a thing. The self is a methodology, a process. A troublemaker doesn't merely make trouble for herself — she makes trouble *as* herself. She becomes the unnamable trickster, the quantum indefinite, the tree that falls in the forest and so is no longer a tree (and, if repeated enough, no longer in a forest).

I can't make it cohere — Pound's admission of failure at the very end of *The Cantos* was his wasted moment of transcendence into a process that has no end. His anxiety and ours is the awful friction between our belief in resolution and the empirical evidence of its impossibility. Our very hands slip through our fingers.

I want to ruin my attachment to the fixed, thingly self, the confining shell of identity whose comforts are jail disguised — and be animated into limerant catastrophe, abandonment in the bardo, radical infatuation with the so wrong. I want to be out of prison and deep in trouble. No need for elaborate escape schemes — the cell doors have never been locked. You have always been free. Everything is already attained (just not yet, as Anselm Berrigan would say). It doesn't take much duress to break your clutch on self-preservation — because the self isn't much of a thing to preserve. Extremis carries us away and permits every stance to contain its opposite — revulsion becomes desire and vice versa. It's why people cry during sex with their best friend or (hopefully a long time later) laugh at their funeral.

I'm sure this essay will get me into hot water with the six or seven people who read it. But any biologist will tell you, we are *made* of hot water. We are the heat of winter's voluptuous desire, ruining winter into spring. Yes! But what is ruin? And what is desire?

Ruin is the condition which compels us to form a new identity because the old one is no longer tenable. It is horror. Worst case. But it's the opposite of tragic. Only the failed response to ruin is tragic— as when a

scandalized public figure reforms into even more of an automaton and reenters the arena of lame expectations and rehearsal for the hearse. Or when the insurrectionist misinterprets the uprising's darkest hour as failure — and either joins the oppression or, worse yet, corrupts the true moment of transformation into a replica of the old stratification with the revolutionary cadre on top. Success at the expense of one's true desire is the tragedy.

The venerable revelation of the end as the means is hard to recognize. And ruin's bad rap comes from that difficulty. How can we come to see Keatsian wreckage as the age-old pre-req. for metamorphosis? We unconceal the world (as Martin Heidegger would say) through our projects, the actions we take and which engage us back — especially those that challenge the stasis of our identity. True, the uncertainty, darkness, doubt at the fiery threshold of the singularity is hard to overcome. By definition we can take nothing with us — not the self as thing, nor any belongings (for there is no longer an *I* for them to belong to) nor god for there's nobody (Where the hell are you? It's me Margaret) to receive even comfortingly false answers. Even your fellow travelers have a bad feeling about this and, flying by the seat of their hotpants, are likely to end up elsewhere. But once through the event horizon, ruin sheds its burden of bleak connotations. In total destitution, all assets reveal themselves to have been liabilities. Needless demands that prevented the full expression of your troublemaking desire.

And what is desire? Christians, Buddhists and Vulcans all agree that you need to get rid of it. Desire is at the stark center of every cautionary scripture and don't-stray fairy tale. Desire

leads only to forbidden fruit, meat and all other consumables that will in turn consume you! But warnings, repeated enough, become inducement — inadvertent invitations to pursue the divine, complete with instructions. Desire-as-practice renders you delicious to the universe, impossible to resist. The universe must have you and in having you, leave you nothing. The true aim of desire is to make room for what you love — to make the self an empty cavern the size and shape of that desire. An enflamed vacuum into which the idol is drawn. Desire is not selfish, it is in opposition to the self so that an antithetical new entity might emerge through delirious mediation with an other.

Desire is *not* about attaining the object of desire. Once you have possessed the precious, its force is neutralized. And almost immediately desire begins elsewhere, anew, wolflike in its hungry pursuit, deerlike in its delicate knowledge that all targets are an extension of itself, or at least require dissolution of the self in order to pursue. Desire creates the wolf and the deer in each of us, desire to consume and be consumed and so embody the infinite. But not even the most Whitmanesque self could contain such infinite opposition. Desire does not want to catch the beloved. It wants to catch ruin and, in being ruined, obtain the identity we are meant to have. A new identity with amplified capacity for desire that can, in turn, achieve even deeper self-demolition. Buddha and the Beast are one.

Even William Blake, the wolf-deered personification of innocence and of experience, intuited that gratified desire was not what men and women want — rather the *lineaments* of gratified desire. We want to be

moving ever closer to the goal along an ever hotter line. For scientists, the lineament is the disturbed geology above tectonic faults where otherwise impossible fauna live, fueled as they are by the core's energy. We are most animated when roving in the fault's maw. It is dangerous — the earth will open — “it is boiling, bitter, red! It is love!” (A. Rimbaud) but it's stupid not to traverse the tumultuous plain for “the shortest distance / between two points / is love” (C. Bernstein).

But what happens at point B? If we follow Lacanian faultlines we reach not the beloved but... more desire! A concept he lifted from Nietzsche (though he quoted Freud) who pinched it collective-unconsciously (hello are you there, Jung? It's me Friedrich!) from Rumi who vicked it from the dialectic of lover and beloved as embodied in 13th century Persian prosody. Cupid's arrow flies light and straight, but the air around it is rife with turbulence. Jacques Lacan can (through the same loose-minded interpretation he brought to his mentors) be sourced from mathnawi, a poetics of simultaneous reaching and letting go built on couplets that mutate in relation to each other. Lacan is best appreciated in a charged field that spans seemingly irreconcilable eras, regions and conceptual industries — just as the most fulfilled desire is informed by everyone and thing who shapes the beloved.

Rumi's masterwork, also called *Mathnawi*, echos in its very structure, the lover and beloved, being and lack, I and other — each non-existent without its correlate. Using that form, he articulates a new concept of desire: two kings abdicate and wander the earth hand in hand, destitute and ecstatic after uncovering the secret of *atasal*, unity with the divine

through love. “You abandon kingdoms, because you want more than kingdoms.”

More! But more what? Half a world and centuries in opposite directions, Friedrich Nietzsche and Siddhartha Gautama Buddha followed identical lineaments to *atasol*. Upending the values of 6th century BCE Sarnath and 19th century Weimar, each challenged misguided conceptualizations of love (for things, ideas and people). Concepts predicated on the belief love is a finite resource. Raised, as most of us are, on inconsistent affection, it’s hard to accept that our capacity to desire and to receive desire is infinite. But in that acceptance is the paradoxical freedom from anxiety of possession against impending scarcity. Love is not precious because it is the rarest element, it is precious because it is the *only* element. And as we are made of it, there is no possession. There is no scarcity.

We need not be accountants, metering our hearts, nor nervous jailors locking our partners away from the world lest their desires threaten our position as sole beneficiary. “This love has furnished the concept of love as the opposite of egoism while it actually may be the most ingenious expression of egoism,” says old crazy Nietzsche. And it *is* crazy to permit incursions of the world into our intimate affiliations, be they with people or modes of being. You risk becoming Fernando Pessoa’s jaded sensualist or Graham Greene’s intellectual dilettante. You risk throwing out engagement with possession and so blow your shot at either.

But all real love is *amor fou* and what better way to locate the apotheosis of affection not in covetousness but in the sacramental

passion, the shared and braided desire of entangled commitment. Without risking loss of, I risk never being lost in. In my desire for the beloved to become ever more capable of experiencing and providing experiences otherwise impossible, Walt Whitman isn’t expansive enough — I prefer Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium who dispels our limits and separateness with this: “Many people feel small, because they’re small and the universe is big, but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars.” Stars that provided us their atoms in their cataclysmic moment of ruin. Like Frank O’Hara, I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love. And it really isn’t difficult when we are all sourced from the same material — the universe wants us together because we already are, even before we met. We are Andromeda’s castoffs reunited.

Lacan moves us from the world of dervishes, cosmic dust and mustachioed madmen into the pure ontology of want and animation — the essence of desire absent all contingencies. “Desire is a relation of being to lack...this lack is beyond anything which can represent it...Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation.” Just as Descartes’ *cogito* uses thought as the proof of a self to do the thinking, (what I refer to as) Lacan’s *ego ergo sum* predicates the self as a locus of *desire*. I lack therefore I am. The autonomous self is impossible, deriving existence only from the yearned for. *What* we want is conditional and transitory, but *that* we want gives us being. Desire is the animating principle behind all metamorphosis. In fact, the more assured we are of possession,

the less we ourselves are brought into being. “Wings evolved through the act of grasping,” says evolutionary supernaturalist Tracey McTague, on the leap from dinosaur to bird.

Metamorphosis isn’t possible, it is a certainty. It is more than inevitable — it is happening right now in our expansion or contraction this very moment. Double or nothing replacement of the comfortable stability with the responsibility of perilous pearl-handled days and nights. Responsibility not just to yourself but to the Max Stirneresque community of drawn-together individuals. Desire, love and all the variants that define our mutable self exists, by definition, in relation to the selves we desire and desire us. And so our responsibility extends out into the unseverable net of which we are a part. Your choreography moves the ground on which I am moving, and my response affects yours — and cascades in powerful spheres to everyone you and I know. Observed on that level, there is no difference between me and the sum total of everyone I am involved with, and all of their engagements — and so on, until the distinction between *individual* and *all* is non-sensical. (Flowing in one direction this would seem to obliterate the self, and it does. But in the other direction, the self determines the nature of the universe and so becomes god.)

In this much more personal and accurate way, I is not *an* other — *I is each other*. Or rather, I is the process by which selves change their neighbors and are, in turn, changed. We are created by the space between us, and by the techniques we deploy to move closer or further away. We do so in an environment that is nothing but everyone else’s responses to our acts. I is we, not us — the agent of meta-

morphosis, not its passive beneficiary. We prosper to the degree we joyfully carry the mantle. Within this woven field, rebirth is not an event, it is an ongoing state.

To act from the interpersonal self, created by each other, none of us is alone. You are an immediate cause of whatever it is that I am. I is a *we* — not an *us* that things happen to but a *we* — the subject, the *agency of metamorphosis*. I am implicated in your actions. And you are as much the creator of this essay as I am. As the Rev. W. Awdry might say, I hope you like this Ontology of Desire because you helped me to make it. In Kantian terms, you are the Grundlegung of the Metaphysik of my Sitten. (Those who would miss the point by saying I here conflate ontology with ethics can confellate themselves and, as the University of Chicago motto goes, “so be human life enriched.”)

Yet our actions and thoughts, the intimacies we generate, are specific and temporal. Everything that begins, ends — hellos contain their own farewell. For relationships based on coercion, a comforting thought. Adios debt! Tschüß boss! But for relationships based on shared desire, it’s disheartening. And for the ultimate relationship — the self-aware ouroboros of mindful presence — the thought that the self will be swept away is terrifying. How can you wave goodbye with a hand that no longer exists? Our projections into and from the world are all too temporary — but their effects can be made permanent if we provide them the necessary wings.

The first lineament to guide us past this obstacle is that the agents of change are changed by their very acts. Desire never had

a beginning and so doesn't have an end. That we are entrained to one another makes us infinite and to desire renders us eternal. The realists and idealists can duke it out over the ontology of pure Platonic forms from which all animating drives manifest (embodied or conceptual?). I'm concerned with action in the world, which is more fulfilling — and rigorous, and accurate. ("You can talk dirty all you want, but at some point you have to fuck." — Leibnitz, quoting a letter Descartes wrote to Voltaire's wife.) In the thrall of love we are spectacularly ruined before we start. The self as *thing* ends all the time, but it is a rhetorical fallacy — the self is change propelled by desire which, by its nature, overcomes mortality and the mind-body dialectic *in actio ex desiderium*.

Desire can be erotic, intellectual or spiritual but it predates us and will continue after we're gone. The contingencies mutate — infatuation with a specific person or idea runs its course or you may get tired of whatever static identities have fallen prey to your talons, the contingencies shed themselves, but the essence remains. In fact, stripped of its specificities, the essences become more apparent.

But how do we escape the demands and constraints that prevent not just pursuit of our desires, but the very recognition of what they are? Our essences might be painfully apparent but how can we position ourselves such that we feel them and not just the pain? This essay and the book it's in is a contrivance, a machine, like going to church or drinking before noon, that removes us from ordinary time and forces us to consider the universe from a place outside it. Both my

having written it and your having delved this far into it constitutes a practice. But does it create enough of a synapse to send messages between yourself and whatever it is within you that reflects on the self? Years ago it was easier to leave a place — Gertrude Stein left America so her writing could return to it — but now the map is closed. Travel anywhere on the five continents is relatively easy but when you get there, well, Paramus and the Mysterious Orient have the same chain stores.

True story: I got kicked out of a Men's Wearhouse in Darjeeling, India because I was drinking tea from Starbucks next door. I was, *but this is Darjeeling, I can't drink tea in Darjeeling?* And they were, *sir this isn't Darjee — this is a Men's Wearhouse.*

The world is under the control of a single set of false normative constraints in which we are the complicit co-creators. It's not the fiery eye of Mordor that is staring down at us, but all of us who are looking through the eye. To see the world as it could be (that is, as it wants to be (that is, as it already is, only not yet)) we have to rely on weird unlit alcoves and the darkest alleys — like the horror of trauma or the innocuousness of a treatise on sheer rapture disguised as a dull critical essay. Invisible spaces beyond the singularity, in which our eyes can stop seeing what it's been told to see. But this essay, even the book it's embedded within, is a mere blink. Once we reopen our eyes or step out from the darkness, how do we carry our freedom from the mapped world within us?

Writing poetry is a form of insurrection — not necessarily revolution, because the unmoving pivot isn't centered on overthrow-

ing the external world as much as creating another more compelling world that we can rise up into. The Wobblies called it “building the germ of the new in the shell of the old.” Heidegger called it “a happening of truth setting itself to work. “William Carlos Williams said in his essay *Against the Weather*: “I’ve been writing a sentence with all the art I can muster. Here it is: A work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm.”

You can also think of it as a kind of alchemy in which we the practitioners are the lead projected into gold. And a collection of poetry with a focus on its own creation amplifies that alchemical insurgency. It creates a structure by which the transformative medium remains operative even after the final page. You know how we do this? This journal is a way of becoming possessed by one another’s spirits and by the larger collective spirit that exists only because of the practice we engage here. It is lineament that directs us to the infinite other ways in which we enlarge ourselves through collective desire. Every moment, every point contains the morphic impulse. Every spot on earth is charged with having been the place some person or animal has either died or been born. Right here, where you are reading this sentence, someone has died or been born.

We are all going to die, and we are going to have our hearts broken and filled before that, perhaps many times — You are thinking of someone right now, right? Their face so vivid to you. You brought a new kind of existence into them or they did in you. We all have this in common, this ushering in or out. Ten years from now, as we go through some form of

suffering or elation, long after we’ve forgotten the names associated with those faces — what will remain are the ideas and adaptations we developed together, ready to be called into action. The more you exercise the spirit, the stronger it becomes.

Built into the very nature of Lungfull! are concealed portabilities of a usefully dark ethos. Creating, consuming and being consumed by poetry (and all the non-compliances implicit in those acts) are declarations of allegiance to trouble. Not just getting into, but *staying* in trouble, wielding tension, recognizing that the irresolvable isn’t an intractable prison, but rather, that everything *not* irresolvable is the trap. It’s portable because it is all within us already, or in the relationships we form, which is really the same thing. We can use duress as a means of release from the confines of the self. We can employ covert means, like variants of samizdat, to mitigate risk as we transition to more infinite states, which at the same time creates new risks. We can embrace marginalization and invisibility as an asset that permits a wider field of action. We can intensify our perception of hypocrisy, a kind of conceptual violence, and come to terms with people around (and within) us who have committed unforgiveable accomplishments against humanity.

The people we love are mortal. Some of them are already dead. When John Godfrey read an elegy for a friend at Zinc Bar last Sunday, the room realized someone there would be writing one for John in some number of years. Someone else would write one for that person and three year old Aurora, sitting next to me with Slumber Pup would write one for them. My friend Matt Easton said (I like that

my oldest friend's initials are ME) the night they tried to end Occupy by evicting Zucotti, "Strike me down now and I will only become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." Obi Wan Kenobi has some solid Joseph Campbellian slogans for us as we near the end of our time, in this essay, together. But there are others too, ready to remind us that *we are the process and the process never ends*.

There are ample metaphysical trainers to sustain us into the unknown beyond trouble and resolution, to make permanent the effects of every moment. People who can keep us from retreating into the false control of rationality or into the abdication of mysticism. (If any Greek gods are listening in, *I'm onto you! We all are! Chronos & Chiron are the same guy!*) We have no choice but to exist in a precarious state of constant flux but there are people who can offer encouragement for not freaking out. Troublemakers like negatively capable John Keats, Allen Ginsburg and his triple shot of holy, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's drala and Hakim Bey's TAZ, their cosmologies rise up, possess you, and then they pass. But only after having pushed aside the curtain between this life and the next.

The weakening of normative constraints — all the obstructionist gold standards — means we are ever more able to manifest instances in line with the transformation of every moment. We are free to be the animarum venator, the hunter of souls. Not in the original, somewhat sinister sense used by doomed heretic Giordano Bruno in 1591 but one in which we are all venati, hunted hunters, entrained with complete awareness and willingness to one another. The tree falls, becomes dirt, becomes new plant, is consumed and becomes part

of an animal who falls in turn. There is no night of ruin except to make way for a day of desire. Morphic, you are here with me, and as me, the secret ecstasy within despair. You a secret dervish now (and forever), doorway to the infinite that once open can never be closed.

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New York City
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This essay was adapted from the Poetry Project workshop Poetry, Ruin My Life: The Poetics of Trouble and from conversations at Occupy Wall Street. Here are some ontological/writing exercises that might assist your efforts to destroy everything — everything you have ever been and so remain in an insurrectionary state of heightened generative awareness.

ASSIGNMENT ONE: Make yourself a visionary by writing under duress. Write at a time when you are not yourself. Stay up much later or get up earlier than you ought, run on zero sleep. Maybe you're drunk, or have to piss but are on a subway under the river. Maybe you are in a doctor's waiting room or just before a job interview, or at the dehumanizing job you're lucky to have. Compose in

the midst of a terrible argument with someone you love — or some other time when you are not supposed to write — a time when you are in a damaged, altered, heightened state. When your abilities to filter or process are degraded and comfortable habits aren't there for you to fall back on.

ASSIGNMENT TWO: I think Gandhi said (“I think” meaning I am completely misrepresenting Gandhi) before confronting trouble it's critical to engage acts of self-purification. As a poet interested in social justice or some form of morality — morality in the sense of allowing people to exist in a free, uncoerced state where they are able to most fully come into being — you have to address constructions within yourself that prevent you from experiencing that same freedom or securing that liberation for those around you. What internal institutions foil your efforts to pursue fulfillment? Your habits, modes of thought, material and emotional attachments, aspects of your identity more liability than asset. Write a poem that addresses the problems with your identity, and maybe the larger but more fruitful problems you would face in abandoning that self in favor of something else. Bonus meditation: what new name would you give yourself, or write the poem under?

ASSIGNMENT THREE: Write a poem that comes from a risk you, or someone you admire, took. Consider what was at stake politically, socially and personally. Write directly or obliquely. In fact, you might want to write the initial draft of the poem in a way you're not comfortable with — if your work is driven by a lyrical or descriptive impulse perhaps you want to look at more experi-

mental poets who manifest alien linguistic environments. And if your work tends to foreground language, perhaps you'd like to steep your mind in a tea of clear description for awhile. You can always draft it back into the service of whatever traditions have more resonance, but it's nice to slip into something uncomfortable in order to see more clearly what you're wearing.

ASSIGNMENT FOUR: Write an illicit love poem to someone or thing you ought not to love, or can't love you back. Destroy the poem. Or don't, knowing its existence could destroy you. Bonus collaboration with oppressive authority and demolition of the self: sit in a group, each person writing an unsigned illicit poem. Place poems in a pile in the center — take someone else's poem read it for five minutes then destroy it. A week later, try to reconstruct it from memory as faithful/lessly as possible. (This assignment echoes the soviet experience of samizdat, with internalized normative constraints playing the part of the Stalinist secret police.)

ASSIGNMENT FIVE: Write a protest poem. But one that actually has an impact given the cultural context of both protest and poetry in America. Railing against capitalism, war, racism probably won't make for an interesting piece, in part because it's been railed against before and maybe more forcefully in prose, and a neutered space for poetry has been created to absorb just such work. So what are the unique strengths of contemporary poetry as opposed to other media? The scale of its audience allows it to operate with a great deal of influence on an intimate level. The traditions we have available to us as poets also allow us to create surprising turns and impossible in

other forms. We can rupture expectations and move swiftly. You could write a Dear Obama poem but John Weiners already wrote poems *from* the then president *to* the poet. So you can either aim big and make it strange — which could be interesting but doesn't risk much except aesthetic disaster. OR, perhaps more useful in the context of your self-destruction, think of circumstances where you can't speak freely — to your teacher, parents, boss, partner — cases where, if you did speak your mind, there would be repercussions. Pick one. Write their full name. That's the title. Then address grievances or unmet desires. In a totalitarian regime people have this direct personal relationship with the state. So: write a poem that will wreck your relationship with its target — or maybe turn it into something great, but probably not before wrecking it.

ASSIGNMENT SIX: Write a poem that addresses hypocrisy either within people you know, or in broader culture or both. Try to make it offensive if that helps, or funny, or both. Think about what you could say that deviates enough from conventional wisdom that would render your underlying ideas either invisible or nuts within the context of its reception. Also think about how it might estrange you from your peers who have chosen to ignore the hypocrisy.

ASSIGNMENT SEVEN: Dedicate a poem to someone you've had a falling out with. Can you envision a means of reconciliation? Of expanding your relationship, or your conception of the very idea of relationship, so that you could once again spend time with the person, or at least derive warmth from thinking of them? That falling out may include the person having died — the ultimate rift. So it

can take the form of an elegy. If you have old poems directed at that person from before the fall, maybe you could use them as a germ to build the new one around.

ASSIGNMENT EIGHT: Cultivate invisibility. Write a bannable poem, if you have the strength. Or write in response to the void, the loneliness of the western night that we, as poets, have to face. The decision to become a poet is the decision to be marginal: you will be censored a priori not through judicial ruling but by the total refusal of everyone around you to engage your work. And you will be poor, at least poorer than if you had opted to engage in almost any other activity. But a lack of assets and total marginalization are a strength because, without the burden of maintaining a consumerist lifestyle, without the burden of having to woo a sizeable audience, you are more fully enabled to contemplate and write on an immense sweep of subjects, deploying a wider field of poetics. You are free from the constraints of the very system that your work critiques. One response to this assignment might be to write a poem that nobody will ever read. A poem that may not even exist.

ASSIGNMENT NINE: Write a poem that addresses this: What do you hate most about yourself? Some secret shame in your history. Some limitation among your otherwise marvelous attributes. Some unspeakable desire. Some utter moral failing. But which nevertheless makes you who you are. Some monster within you who, to the degree you love yourself, you have to find some tolerance for. You have to find tolerance for it because it is part of who you are and, if only as a historical fact, it will never go away.

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