

Lector in Fabula: The Poet's Notebooks

Rishma Dunlop, York University
Art by Suzanne Northcott

Notebook 1

Opening the Memory Chamber: Scar Tissue, Testimony, Beauty



"Tourniquet" Suzanne Northcott

*Little as I knew you I knew you: little as you knew me you
know me
—that's the light we stand under when we meet.*

*My testimony: yours: Trying to keep faith
not with each other exactly yet it's the one known and unknown
who stands for, imagines the other with whom faith could
be kept.*

Adrienne Rich, "Inscriptions"

Theoria [L. *theoria*, a theory, from Gr. *Theoria*, a looking at, from *theoreo*, to see, from *theoros*, an observer.] A supposition explaining something; a doctrine or scheme of things resting merely on speculation; hypothesis; plan or system suggested...

Scar n. 1. The mark left on the skin after the healing of a wound or sore; a cicatrix. 2. Any mark, damage or lasting effect from past injury, stress.

Testimony 1. A statement or affirmation of a fact, as before a court. 2. Evidence; proof; also the aggregate of proof offered in a case. 3. The act of testifying; attestation. 4. Public declaration regarding some experience. 5. The Old Testament Scriptures of the Decalogue. [<L testimonium <testis witness. Testament: as in last will and testament. Words to die in.

Beauty the quality attributed to whatever pleases the senses or mind, as by line, color, form, texture, proportion, rhythmic motion, tone, etc., or by behavior, attitude.

Cartography

I once believed that one word had the power to change things. That language was a skin we could inhabit. Now I know that poems are theories, carving memory into the long spine of history. We are caught in the throat, voicing the hours. And the poet's exile is pure sound at the scarred edges of the world's body.

Country, nation, history. I am changing the story. My hand is moving across your page and it is in the mapping of your bones and sinews that I find the words: *grief, love, beauty, testament*. Your mouth yields the vermilion fruit of the word *home*. Let me die here.

Notebook 2

Lector in Fabula: New Literacies



"Vespers" Suzanne Northcott

Vespers

My heart
is caught in its own traps
snares of its own making

addicted to the beauty of words
mainlining dictionaries and weather maps
I contemplate my brokenness
want the language of storms and music

I ride the kisses of zephyrs and arias
wild, symphonic gusts
I want this velocity

my art is uncertain
the tongue struggles
unhinged

reason drowns in the river's
ridged embankments
my body is water, translucent
sliding dark beneath the pool

I gulp for air
the taste of gracenotes,
ascending scales
in sea winds and tidal pools,
the dark voice of the gulf,
the sea's throat
perpetual angelus

the poem ripples to the surface,
opaline light of unknowing,
the mind's fluorescence
at the still point of the turning world,
the heart's scriptures
thawing
a soft rain, falling
falling

Lector in Fabula

I am reading in a school of dreams,
 a lost girl in a night's tale, wandering through
 a *jardin d'essais*, underfoot, the crunch of pale
 green lichen on the forest floor.

Hyacinth gardens fade into a scene of
 city lights and I am on Vancouver's Hasting's Street.
 The pages become stained with east end rot, humanity
 pumping heroin through collapsed veins and
 there on the corner is a woman weeping, the sound of
 her pain palpable in every crack of concrete,
 a prostitute whose knees have been broken by
 a man with a baseball bat. I take her by the hand and
 take her home with me, wash her body and her crushed limbs,
 her sore-covered feet. I try to absorb her fever in my touch,
 lay her down to sleep in my bed.

In the morning when I wake, she is gone,
 only a cool, clear light shining on the tumbled sheets.

Tonight, I'll turn the pages of the book again
 my hands inside the spine, reading the places
 where memory doesn't work.

Scordatura

The posturing glitterati
 at the art gallery
 chatter in front of Edvard Munch's sick children
 suffering men and women
 agonized souls.

The air becomes cloying;
 we escape gasping
 into the night.

In Duthie's Books we browse
 through new releases
 bell hooks'
The Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life.
 I am drawn to it
 wanting words for my poet self
 but the cover image burns
 hands scored with stigmata
patio, the root of passion,
 meaning suffering.
 We step back into the street
 through the crush of people

to find a busker
 fingerless gloves plucking beauty
 on a bandura
 the strains of Pachelbel's Canon
 are made new
 his hands opening harp strings
 into the air.

The night stills,
 through time's disordered architecture
 spilling over history's fragile dams
 as I remember meeting you
 in the brink of my soul's winter
 when you gave me the smoke of your breath
 in the long night
 the stars emptying such clear light
 in you
 such clear light
 love's sonata carving music
 across the sky.

English Education

In the grey concrete classroom,
 fluorescent lights glaring,
 Carla submits her assignment,
 hands wrapped around a cream box
 of handmade Japanese paper,
 bound with gold cord
 inside, texts on sheets of vellum
 transparent overlays, text printed in red
 words by women writers Nicole Brossard,
 Jeannete Winterson, Minnie Bruce Pratt
 Sylvia Plath, Barbara Kingsolver, Adrienne Rich.

Under the words, photos of women's body parts,
 subversions contained, disrupted.

She titles her assignment *Woman Boxed*.

Carla teaches me to breathe,
 spaces in my lungs opening
 her texts, her red ink
 ruptures
 her words my touchstones
 the surprise of it
 sweet teaching.

Strange Fruit

Sun streaming across classroom desks.
Textbooks splayed open. I have assigned a quote from the text,
asking for response to the list of qualities essential for
the effective teacher of literature. The book tells my
students that they must be risk-takers, subversive, that
they must read gladly and openly, for this is their best
hope of introducing others to literature. We use the
book's language, critical thinking, socio-political thought,
the English teacher as subversive.

Chalk dust powders my hands, the walls echo loud
chatter until Luz reads her response:

*During the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s it was not
unusual to find teachers of literature hanging from trees.*

The room weeps. My spine slips, throat closes.
In this classroom, the dark fields of history loom,
edgelit with outrage and the knowledge that language
is always culpable.

Textbooks are momentarily discarded.

Notebook 3
Angelus Novus



"Holding Space" Suzanne Northcott

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. This is how one perceives the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise: it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," IX

Angelus Novus

Glorious autumnal skies. Cathedrals of light.
 First day of classes at the university.
 In another city an uncertain wind howls into dissonance.
 It is not the faces of my students I remember that day, but
 the sheer and immense futility of speech. My words
 stones in my throat. How to teach about literature,
 about poetry, when the book opens to such a page,
 blackened by the charred wings of the angel of history.

After this eleventh day in September, there are those
 fashioning crosses from twigs, praying to angels with persistence.
 It is not the faces of the victims that haunt me, nor the ruined avenues,
 or the steel towers in flame. Not the widows' anguish. Not the
 violinist on the front page of the newspaper, tears streaming
 down her face as she plays a fugue. Not the powdered bone or seared
 flesh, not the face of hatred.

It is the shoes that I remember, the shoes that haunt me, falling
 everywhere like rain from the towers, people running out of their
 shoes, rows of fireman's boots abandoned, a woman's high heel,
 everywhere shoes in that smoldering ash, full lives still hissing
O remember me I walked here. This speech of common steps
 propelling us into the future.

I have no words for this, no speech for my students in the world's
 hours of occlusion. What can I say — that darkness reveals beauty?
 That terror will yield beauty and clear-sightedness? I cannot stand at
 a lectern—professing. I can say nothing.

Yet I stand with them in classrooms day after day, trying to write a new
 page with them. Something that recalls beauty to the mortal, the imperfect,
 the guilty. Something that speaks of stars falling on the city. Something
 that is dream-cut, embossed onto cream-laid papers, my poem for them,
 born of remembrances of those ashen footprints vanishing from the air.
 Something that would allow us all to die in full desire.

Something that would calm the stormwinds blowing in from Paradise.
 Something that would heal those scorched wings, allow the angel to close them,
 fold them gently back into the dark waters of our hearts.

Somewhere, a woman is writing a poem

Somewhere, a woman is writing a poem
in the twilight hours of history, lavender turning to ash,
as time spills over and the moon unfurls her white-pitched fever in
the songs of jasmine winds. The young woman I was climbs the
stairs, the moon's pale alphabet filling her. She tucks her child into
bed, bends over her desk in the yellow lamplight, frees her hand
to write, breaking through the page like that Dorothea Tanning
painting where the artist's hand gashes through the canvas, fingers and
wrist plunged to the bone. She writes a dark, erotic psalm, an elegy,
a poem to grow old in, a poem to die in.

Somewhere, a woman is writing a poem,
as she gives a way the clothes of her dead loved ones,
stretching crumpled wings, her words rise liquid in the air,
rosaries of prayer for the dying children, for the ones who
have disappeared, the *desaparecido*, and for the ones who
have been murdered. She writes through the taste of fear and
rage and fury. She writes in milk and blood, her ink fierce and
iridescent, rooted in love. Somewhere, a woman who thought
she could say nothing is writing a poem and she will sing forever,
blooming in the dark madness of the world.

Notebook 4
The Lost Language of Cranes



"The Lost Language of Cranes II" Suzanne Northcott

The Lost Language of Cranes

I

*For if Hiroshima in the morning, after the bomb has fallen,
Is like a dream, one must ask whose dream it is.*

Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word*

IV

*...Somewhere slow
poetry is being tender with its alphabet.*
Don McKay, "A Morning Song"

Outside my house the morning sun spills,
gilded ripples across the bay.
The cranes stilt across the mudflats.

I wonder what they know, what we have lost,
these birds that mate for life.

Sometimes in the shallow waters of these wetlands,
the cranes dance,
sending waves flying, a language of ancient memories,
a language that teaches us that after grief, it is possible
to love again,
a music we have forgotten, such sheer joy.

When the cranes lift in ascent, cathedrals of wind
rise in their wingbones,
estuaries of morning light lifting across continents,
a white front of radiance,
their cries like clouds of desire.

After, in the presence of still waters,
you can rest in the white light, in the grace of wings.



"The Lost Language of Cranes III" Suzanne Northcott

Notebook 5

Curriculum, Beauty, Words to Greet a Newborn



"Copper Moon" (detail) Suzanne Northcott

*What kind of nation is this
 Deleting love from its curriculum
 The art of poetry
 The mystery of women's eyes
 What kind of nation is this
 Battling each rain cloud...*

Nizar Kabbani

*For beauty is nothing
 But the beginning of terror,
 Which we still are just able to endure,
 And we are so awed because it serenely disdains
 To annihilate us...*

Rainier Maria Rilke, "The Duino Elegies"

Manifesto

Amidst its provocations, what does this art make possible?

It makes it possible, in the poet's notebooks and beyond, to imagine this curriculum vitae, the course of a life that becomes poetry. This poem is a location for the beautiful, for convulsive beauty, the surrealist manifesto in which oppositional forces reside alongside each other. Beauty that is often difficult, falling just short of fear. The beauty of the world is found edged with the scar tissue of history, a cicatrix that knows the borderlines of terror. Yet, amidst the dark fields of history, the embrace of beauty can be education. This beauty is found in our constant revision and interrogation of our own positions in relation to others, so that our minds and hearts and empathies are opened to others. This is what poetry proposes: love, beauty, knowledge, faith, testaments for living alongside terror. Beauty and terror hand in hand in our own desires and daily lives. We endure this. Poetry confronts terror, makes it habitable knowledge, beautiful.

This art makes it possible to imagine a curriculum phrased as a gift to a newborn. A deep song that begins and ends with the word *love*. To make this poem, cradle it in our hands. It will end with the word *love*, a true sentence for greeting a newborn. A lullaby. The art of it, knowledge. Human, imperfect, guilty. Beauty as the evocation and re-evocation of promise. Possible beauty.

Notes for the Reader

Art by Suzanne Northcott from *The Body of My Garden*, a collaborative exhibition and poetry reading with Rishma Dunlop that opened at the Linda Lando Fine Art Gallery, Vancouver, Oct. 24-Nov.2, 2002. Northcott's art formed a response to and artistic dialogue with Dunlop's collection of poems *The Body of My Garden*, Mansfield Press, Toronto, 2002. Suzanne Northcott and Rishma Dunlop continue to work across the genres of literary text and visual art in aesthetic inquiry and collaborative artistic production. The art from *The Body of My Garden* exhibition can be viewed at www.lindalandofineart.com and www.suzannenorthcott.com. See also the collaboration on "Copper Moon: Poem for Matthew Shepard" at: Dunlop, R. (April 2003). "Copper Moon." *Educational Insights*, 8(1). <http://www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v08n01/poeticpause/dunlop/coppermoon.html>

Notebook 1

Notes to Open a Memory Chamber: Scar Tissue, Testimony, Beauty

Art by Suzanne Northcott: "Tourniquet," 18"x18," mixed media on canvas.

The citation from Adrienne Rich's poem "Inscriptions" is from *The Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995.

"Cartography." (Dunlop, R. 2003). *Windsor Review: An International Journal of Life, Literature and the Arts*. Vol 36, No.1, Spring 2003, p. 14.

Notebook 2

Lector in Fabula: New Literacies

Art by Suzanne Northcott, "Vespers," 24"x24," photo on wood.

"Lector in Fabula." The title of this poem is borrowed from Umberto Eco's book *Lector in Fabula*, (1979). Milano: Bompiani. The title is translated as *The Reader in the Story*. Eco's theoretical discussions consider the role of the reader as active agent in the construction and imagination of an author's text.

The poems "Vespers," and "Scordatura" are reprinted from Dunlop, R. (2002). *The Body of My Garden*. Toronto, Mansfield Press, with permission of the author and the publisher.

"Scordatura." The title refers to the mistuning or alternate tuning of a string instrument to achieve unconventional sonorities and chords. Often used in 18th century music in notations for the viola d'amore.

"English Education" is for Carla Mancini.

"Strange Fruit" is for Luz Minero.

Notebook 3

Angelus Novus

Art by Suzanne Northcott: "Holding Space," 48"x 60," acrylic and graphite on canvas.

Epigraph by Walter Benjamin is from "Theses on the Philosophy of History" Part IX, in *Illuminations*, edited and translated by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, pp.257-258.

Notebook 4

The Lost Language of Cranes

Art by Suzanne Northcott.

Section I:

“The Lost Language of Cranes II,” 24”x ,24” mixed media on wood.

“The Lost language of Cranes I,” (detail) 12” x 48,” mixed media on wood.

Epigraph by Peter Schwenger from *Letter Bomb. Nuclear Holocaust and The Exploding Word*. John Hopkins University Press, 1992. Cited in Carolyn Forché’s *The Angel Of History*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994, p.72.

Section II

“The Lost Language of Cranes I,” (detail) 12” x 48,” mixed media on wood.

Section III

“The Lost Language of Cranes I,” (detail) 12” x 48,” mixed media on wood.

Section IV

“The Lost Language of Cranes III,” 12” x 48,” mixed media on wood.

“The Lost Language of Cranes.” An earlier version of this poem appeared in *JCT, Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Vol.18, No.1*, Spring 2002, pp.109-115. Segments of this poem were inspired and informed by Carolyn Forché’s poems, “The Garden of Shukkei-en,” and “Testimony of Light” in her collection *The Angel of History*, New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Hibakusha: The first atomic bomb used in wartime was dropped in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, killing between 130,000 and 150,000 people by the end of that year. The term *hibakusha* refers to survivors of the Atomic Bomb. Those who survived the bombing are aging rapidly now after struggling for many years. Segments of this poem are informed by the testimonies collected and videotaped by the Hiroshima Peace and Culture Foundation to commemorate the International year of Peace in 1986.

Excerpts referring to Sadako Sasaki’s mother, Fujiko Sasaki, are based on a letter titled, “Come Back to Me Sadako,” from *Record of Atomic Bombs in Japan* by Seishi Toyota, Nihon Tosho Center, 1991.

When Sadako died on October 25, 1955, her classmates folded the missing paper cranes to make a thousand and placed them in the coffin with Sadako’s body. Since then the paper crane has become an international symbol of nuclear disarmament.

Sadako’s friends and classmates collected Sadako’s letters and writings and published them under the title *Kokeshi*, after the name of a doll they had given Sadako in the hospital. Inspired by this collection and the remarkable effect Sadako’s story had on others, Eleanor Coerr wrote the powerful book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, published by G.P. Putnam in 1993.

Sadako’s classmates began a national campaign to build a monument in her memory. It was built to honor all children who suffered from the devastating consequences and effects of the atomic bomb. The Statue of Sadako is also known as The Children’s Monument. Built in 1958 with donations from school children, the monument stands in the center of Hiroshima’s Peace Park surrounded by thousands of paper cranes from people all over the world. At its base is a plaque with the following inscription:

*This is our cry
This is our prayer
Peace in the world*

Notebook 5: Curriculum, Beauty, Words to Greet a Newborn

Art by Suzanne Northcott: Detail from “Copper Moon,” 18” x 48,” acrylic and phototransfer on wood.

“Somewhere a woman is writing a poem” was first published in *Educational Insights*, Vol.7, No.2, 2002. www.csci.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v07n02/contextualexplorations/dunlop/

Citation by Nizar Kabbani is from *Republic of Love*, translated by Nayef Alkalali. London:Kegan Paul International, 2002. Cited as an epigraph to Joy Harjo’s book of poems *How We Became Human*. New York: WW. Norton, 2002.

Citation by Rainier Maria Rilke is from “The Duino Elegies,” in *The Selected Poetry of Rainier Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 151.

Abstract

Lecteur de fable: Le cahier de notes du poète
Rishma Dunlop, Université York

Dans cet article, l’auteur explore les notions d’alphabétisation nouvelles et critiques. Se rappelant le livre d’Umberto Eco *Lector in Fabula* (le lecteur dans l’histoire), le lecteur est considéré comme un agent actif dans la construction et l’imagination de textes, invité dans un processus de coopération d’interprétation quand l’histoire de “l’autre” est lu. L’élaboration de théories et la conceptualisation à propos de la lecture, écriture, l’enseignement, et les interconnexions d’alphabétisation avec des souvenirs et déclarations historiques sont explorés. La formule cahier de notes, textes poétiques, et l’interaction avec l’art visuel créé un texte à plusieurs niveaux, une requête qui utilise une “poiesis” historiographique, la création d’art comme réponse aux événements culturels. Le “Manifesto” culminant, une formule utilisé historiquement par les activistes, politiciens, théoristes, artistes, et mouvement de résistance, devient un appel à l’action, une innovation pour considérer les possibilités de l’art comme agent d’éducation de justice sociale pour l’action et les pensées d’éthique.

In this article, the author explores notions of critical and new literacies. Recalling Umberto Eco’s book *Lector in Fabula* (the reader in the story), the reader is considered an active agent in the construction and imagination of texts, invited into a process of interpretive cooperation as the story of the “other” is read. Theorizing and conceptualizing about reading, writing, teaching, and interconnections of literacy with historical remembrance and testimony are explored. The notebook form, poetic texts, and interplay with visual art create a multi-layered text, an inquiry that employs historiographic poiesis, artmaking as a response to curricular and historical events. The culminating “Manifesto,” a form historically used by activists, politicians, theorists, artists, and resistance movements, becomes a call to action, an invitation to consider the possibilities of art as an agent of social justice education for ethical thought and action.

About the Author

Rishma Dunlop is a professor of Language and Literary Studies in the Faculty of Education at York University, Toronto. Her research interests include literary theory, fine arts cultural studies, literature and art of witness, ethics and social justice education. Current research projects include work on *Testimony, History and Memory*, an exploration of the engagement with literature and the arts for human rights and social justice education. Her ongoing collaborations with visual artists include exhibitions of literary texts and art, collaborative publications and performances. She is the founder of a research collective of women artists/researchers called *The Red Shoes Collective*. Rishma Dunlop is a poet and fiction writer whose work has won awards and has appeared in numerous books and journals. She is the author of two volumes of poetry, *Boundary Bay*, (1999, Staccato/Turnstone Press) and *The Body of My Garden* (2002, Mansfield Press). She has recently completed a new manuscript titled *Slow Burn*.

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About the Artist

Suzanne Northcott lives in the historic village of Fort Langley, B.C. Her work ranges from contemporary figurative to abstraction. Her work revolves around an exploration of the nature of boundaries and what lies between: between self and other, the material and the subconscious world, or the space between disparate places. She works mainly in acrylic on wood or canvas, sometimes in combination with drawing media and photo-transfer. A senior member of the Federation of Canadian Artists, Suzanne Northcott teaches creative process and life drawing in British Columbia and across Canada. She has guest lectured at Capilano College, University College of the Fraser Valley, The University of British Columbia and York University. Her work is widely collected and her awards include the prestigious Aim for Arts International Show and this year's Spillsbury bronze medal. Her ongoing collaboration with poet Rishma Dunlop is a continuation of her fascination with words and image and follows an earlier project "The Sex Lives of Vegetables," with poet Lorna Crozier.

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