

The feeling of having not been looking and then finding or losing; of not knowing you had something to say and then hearing speech—and then not knowing if the voice belongs to you, to someone else, or the extent to which a voice can *belong*. Asking, does it belong more to a *from* or to a *where*, a speaker or a listener? Or whence—when and where does the voice become more memory than event, more echo than origin?

What we are becomes a memory, the hand may open a secret lock.

The poem enters on tiptoe, climbs the terrain,  
weary, it listens to minimal sound, the slowed  
tree branches are drawn on purpose, part of the same program.

### **Minimal Sound** (*The Red Gaze*)

And what are we / is it (*thereafter*) ? Is it—what we are, after—there? After there, what are we—an *is* or an *it* ? Is it what we do—is it poetry? We are what we do, and what we do is poetry. I was in New York City and having a horrible time.

And yesterday a classmate will tell me: *I want to include as many perspectives and as many spaces as possible in my poetry. But in a minimal way.* (Right now) I imagine a moment from Guest's "Rocks on a Platter" responding:

*The Moment a limit is posited  
it is overstepped, and that  
against which the limit was  
established is absorbed.*

*Adorno, Aesthetic Theory*

Without shyness or formality:

"a gesture of *allowing oneself time*"

Remember how starry it arrives the hope of another idiom, beheld  
that blush of inexactitude, and the furor, it  
will return to you, flotsam blocked out.

compose, like Schoenberg, *poem* music

"robustly"

"flotsam of the world of appearances"  
drifting by and out of the picture,

where the throne disappears . . .

#### IV (*Rocks on a Platter*)

So visiting bookstores is the only thing I've ever enjoyed doing in NYC, which feels like too much of an anachronism in 2017—when the facts point towards the obsolescence of the

bookform and my desires to universal access to literature. (*In a likeness*): later in the hotel room that night Ryan teaches me how to use the *I Ching* using <http://www.ichingonline.net/> after leafing through Guest together. John Cage, John Ashbery, and other men are (rightfully) talked over—not about.

Light strikes light father strike light stroke  
Light strike father stroke light strike stroke  
Father light strike light strikes light stroke

(from *I Ching*)

I tell my other classmate, the would-be poet Tali, after confessing to being more of a maximalist than a minimalist, that I don't see a difference between the two but appreciate the importance of such a distinction. Not only am I thinking about the mini/maxi-malist qualities of Guest, but Lispector:

Between two musical notes there exists another note, between two facts there exists another fact, between two grains of sand, no matter how close together they are, there exists an interval of space, there exists a sensing between sensing—in the interstices of primordial matter there is the mysterious, fiery line that is the world's breathing, and the world's continual breathing is what we hear and call silence.

&

Hell is my maximum.

(from *The Passion According to G.H.*)

When believing fails, trips to the big city are mostly horrible because no matter how much time

one spends walking *searching*, and no matter with how much love for the surrealism of the scum of searching one walks, there are so many buildings and none of them belong to us. And when it rains the event is easier to believe if you imagine everyone above you is crying than there being real precipitation. And when / the sky / at night / is clear / one is / aware // more of all / the absence / all / the loss; one remembers

[...] words like 'many  
loves' come forward the surprise of white stars

[But now]

Many loves changes to many times falling into  
the day's lucid marshes

a tap on the shoulder or a first grasping that  
object full of sparks

the wilderness untangled by it.

The fierceness with which it forged its memory,  
its daylight, its absence.

from **The Luminous** (*If So, Tell Me*)

Last week the combined military forces of Russia and Syria reclaimed the Palmyra ruins from ISIS control for the second time. "The Türler Losses" (a poem about *losing* the objects we use to *keep* time), written almost forty years ago, continues to interact with the world: it pointed me to a

*real* place undergoing *real* changes that I had otherwise been neglecting. Guest writes:

Türler patterns

distinct as

Palmyra ruins

Here it is both the aesthetic and mechanical patterns of an object that keeps time compared with the weathered architecture that keeps—contains—history. The difference between what was "distinct" then and what is "distinct" now defines our moment; the poem—reading and following the poem—helps construct an understanding about reality. And later:

Substantial contents alert in tombs. Presences.

As loss is absence.

[...]

Moving into elsewhere music moves us  
to boulders.

These columns. Shadows secure in thunder.

As boats move thick against water forests  
contained by sky.

These are contents.

Loss gropes towards its vase. Etching the way.

Drawing horses around the Etruscan rim.

There is a quality of making that is remembering—preserving. The ruins have been preserved virtually *here*; they have also been preserved *here* (above) and *here* and *here*—because a friend of mine *believes* that objects possess a kind of phenomenological life we as yet do not understand or appreciate,

The light is not idle, it is full of rapid

changes we can call voyages  
if we like, moving from room to room.  
How representative of us this thoughtful  
weather that has travelled the water  
to reach us, the touch of a certain side  
of the skin where we open the window.

Our eyes are viewing monuments  
constantly, the angry sculpture  
of the facade it is also a journey  
to the center where the rock is uncut.

from **Direction** (*The Blue Stairs*)

In the New York bookstore—*This elaborate structure around the text* ("Doubleness")— I decided to spend the last of my American currency on one book; I was definitely looking for something that had anything to do with Frank. Then *a single column* announced itself to my eye to speak against the obsolescence of such discovery: on the shelf of the structure around the text I found a life—Barbara's life—a life yet to be appreciated to the degree that it deserves. On this unfortunate and upsetting oversight, Maggie Nelson writes:

None of the full-length considerations of the school to appear thus far—David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, William Watkin's *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde*, and Geoff Ward's *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*—offers a feminist perspective, and none includes Barbara Guest (the only first-generation female poet) as a principal subject of interest.

(*Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, xv)

Upon opening the book I am immediately drawn in by Guest's proclamations that, beyond "[invoking] the unseen" (xvii),

The most important act of a poem is to reach further than the page so that we are aware of another aspect of the art....What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, so that it appears to have *no beginning and no end, so that it overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page.*

*(Forces of Imagination, 100)*

I then open it randomly and do indeed find a poem dedicated to Frank—or his refrigerator—I can't remember; obviously I leave with the book, and what I have found and kept is a body of work so large I am not at this point able to even process all of it, let alone honourably write about it.

Nelson, addressing the idea that the poets of the New York School represented the last true avant-garde—the reason, perhaps, why I and many others continue to search for writings by and writings on O'hara, Ashbery, Schulyer, and Koch without knowing virtually anything about Guest or others:

...one might fairly ask why such a bell tolls for the American avant-garde precisely at the cultural moment of the triple "liberations" of the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the gay/lesbian movement, and the consequent rise to prominence of art from these corners. To declare the death of an art form—or of the civic value of the academy, for that matter—just as its demographics and fields of interest undergo a profound and hard-won diversification—strikes me as deeply troubling.

*(Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions,*

Images of the fifth edition of *Yugen 5*, 1959:

[insert images]

The importance of celebrating, revising, and continuing to use the forces of the imagination cannot be overstated (ever, but especially) in times when what has been formerly thought impossible continues to announce itself as possible—as *happening*. Such an emphasis—as is everywhere in the poetry of Barbara Guest—falls directly (as if there is anything else) on our reality.

Cloud fields change into furniture  
furniture metamorphizes into fields  
an emphasis falls on reality.

[...]

In her words this force has "a disruptive and capricious power". It is tempting, for the political reader, upon reading the word "disruptive", to expect poems capable of collapsing our most undesirable economic and social superstructures faster than some believe termite capable of liquefying steel beams. And in the word "capricious", the sensitive or perhaps bi-polar reader might expect poems that mirror an increasingly bi-polar reality, or they may find poems that appear, short of being able to speak and agree with each other, barely harmonize in and of themselves. The initial disappointment or confusion of these readers, if sat with and allowed to breathe, will identify—locate—its *ideal* object in the inverse that the *silent revision* of time offers.

I was envious of fair realism.

I desired sunrise to revise itself  
as apparition, majestic in evocativeness.  
two fountains traced nearby on a lawn . . . .

you recall treatments  
of "being" and "nothingness"  
illuminations apt  
to appear from variable directions—  
they are orderly as motors  
floating on the waterway,  
so silence is pictorial  
when silence is real.

[...]

Guest's poems are, all at once, incendiary bodies of water composed like the music John Cage thinks only a city capable of making that apperceive history, philosophy, and art as organs of one entity that does not begin or end, is never the same, and will never make sense. There is in fact virtue in this absence of sense.

The wall is more real than shadow  
or that letter composed of calligraphy  
each vowel replaces a wall

a costume taken from space  
donated by walls...

These metaphors may be apprehended after

they have brought their dogs and cats  
born on roads near willows,

willows are not real trees  
they entangle us in looseness,  
the natural world spins in green.

[...]

Such a fact is true also for those in search of a measure or rule for the capacity of poetry to affect reality. The difference between any given impetus and impact, any beginning and end—these being particular moments—is not only questioned by Guest but often transcended beautifully: an ascent-towards that is not *a* moment but *the* moment:

A column chosen from distance  
mounts into the sky while the font  
is classical,

they will destroy the disturbed font  
as it enters modernity and is rare . . . .

The necessary idealizing of your reality  
is part of the search, the journey  
where two figures embrace

from **An Emphasis Falls on Reality** (*Fair Realism*)

The figures are subjects, objects, moments and places—embraced as a totality not in a moment we approach and reach but in the infinite moment of approaching and reaching.

The advice I give to Tali I give while thinking of Guest. I say: *play with space, with empty space, with (un)limited space. fill the spaces with voices and play with how honest or intentional you are about your space and its voices. about who or what is talking about.* I didn't say all of this then but I say all of this now, and like then with the difference between isms, now with *here* and *then* and *there* and *now*.

In a cabin north of Montreal, receiving a special lecture on *Paradise Lost*, receiving yet another explanation of how and why iambic pentameter works, how and why deviating from form emphasizes significance, the philosopher's partner—a poet who I wish was talking more than the philosopher—says that contemporary poets no longer think about meter but music; she recalls being in workshops where fellow poets expressed a need for a word with a certain beat or sound; my copy of Guest rests on the couch beside them, and about 3/5 of a full measure through the book Guest's "Musicality"—a poem in which the use-value of words is explored instead of their exchange-value; in which the paper sings and is painted upon by the ear of the reader. Meanwhile, "Satan is speaking from the perspective of the [eye]"—on which the feminine ending, falls

The wave of building murmur

                  fetid      slough from outside  
a brown mouse      a tree mouse.

                  two trees leaning forward  
the thick new-made emptiness

Naturalism.

Hanging apples      half notes  
in the rhythmic      ceiling      red flagged  
rag clefs

notational margins

the unfinished

cloudburst

a barrel cloud fallen from the cyclone truck  
they hid under a table the cloud

with menacing disc

from *Musicality*

We do an erasure exercise because the poet has brought Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os* with her. Having just finished reading *ARK* I am thrilled by the coincidence—which is just another word for providence—and try to channel both Guest and Johnson, producing, from Satan's first

speech:

of Heav'n we may hope and receive and breathe  
Eternity. By force impossible, create Light  
All things, all thoughts

Also in this cabin, the night prior, someone dressed as Dido shouts: Where is my Aeneas? And a young man with hair screaming from root to shoulderblade says: At an opera at McGill! And I am speechless, thinking, mercifully, of Guest:

I love you

I have permitted myself to say choirs  
(as if the late birds sang in branches) when for them  
in the dusk at wind set  
the garage yields its water cup.

Not for us the paling light

the white urn at the driveway,  
nor for us the palmettos and the squeak  
of tiles The fountain at noonday cries,  
"You are not here" and the sea at its distance  
calls to a single path flanked by hibiscus,  
the sea reminds itself each day  
that it is solitary and the bather gambles  
in its waves as a suicide who says "tomorrow is  
another" an hour in the wrecker foam.

I love you

I am writing your name as if I were a Trojan

who expected someone else to smooth shore  
of souls who said  
to the great reaches of wave and salt,  
"I am replenishing as a light falling on a single tree"  
and it is wonderful like ice on a floe,

I love you  
miracle, mirror, word, all the same  
you come, you go  
I love you  
(on my rioting lawns the plaster flamingos  
endure your wonder)

**Dido to Aeneas (*Archaics*)**

I find in Guest hymns, instructions, (notes for of and towards) paintings and installations, criticism, words of encouragement, confessions, conversations had and eavesdropped upon, yet-to-be-defined structures and architextures, and I find all this by merely reading—her words and her emptiness, her (dis)locations, (dis)beliefs—what she (un)conceals. On Guest's markedly unique poetics, Elizabeth Robinson writes:

Erasure and Invisibility [...] have the quality of a natural force, though force is probably the wrong word here. Rather, presences visit the poem, having the agency to bear darkness and lift darkness [...]

*(Barbara Guest: Reverie and Apparition, 3)*

My instinct is to disagree with Robinson's hesitation to use the word; but upon further reflection, I think, perhaps what she experiences here does not feel like force because it does not *act upon*; because, instead, the reader of Guest acts upon—*visits, bears, and lifts*—the poem. I am inclined

to believe this. And if Guest's is a poetics of erasure, of presenced structures of absence, it follows that reading her is a unique kind of *poiesis*—one I confidently call e(mb)rasure.

By reading we elaborate, complete, and presence the poems beyond their built-in limitations; through us they become and exceed themselves.

attached to skull  
and secret coordination —;

a solitary cry  
and embrace —  
masks an embrace of  
rosier blandishment

and these recoveries:

the clean

interstices of *composition* and brings  
*the tenure or holding* within the quill's  
*HALT* and miscellany.

from **Quill, Solitary** APPARITION (*Quill, Solitary* APPARITION)

(Finally,) Quoting P.D. Ouspensky in a moment of "The Türler Losses", Guest writes:

*Look now forwards and let the backwards be\**

By reviewing and co-constructing the past we are, in reality, imagining and creating the future—which is now. It is here—in this moment of an attempt to remember Barbara Guest, a poet so full of the past and future—that I wish to HALT this particular recovery and composition. When I hold this beautiful book I can feel, without the help of my imagination, the presence of a life that will continue to co-exist with it as long as we continue to read. I urge you to.