

DON'T BE SCARED

MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI

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edited and designed by ELÆ [Lynne DeSilva-Johnson] with Orchid Tierney



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<mailto:operator@theoperatingsystem.org>

DON'T BE SCARED



*for my students*



On the first  
day of class I told  
my students not  
to be scared of the  
word CARTESIAN. I said it  
was just a kind of  
shorthand for  
an idea. It was Tuesday  
the second week  
of August. A hot, swampy, Tuesday  
in the state of Georgia, a kind of shorthand  
for an idea of America. IF YOU  
ONLY KNOW  
ONETHING  
ABOUT RENE DESCARTES, I said to them  
that morning, I BET YOU KNOW  
WHAT CARTESIAN MEANS.  
I was  
a little nervous because  
I felt self-conscious. Or I felt self-conscious  
because I was

a little nervous. My arms  
and jokes felt heavy  
and fell flat. After a little bit  
of silence  
someone said  
with a question mark in her voice,  
I THINK, THEREFORE, I AM,  
and I said, YES!  
On the first day of class  
my sympathy  
with students is abstract  
because  
my students are still  
an abstraction. I don't know their names.  
An abstracted other  
makes a professor feel  
heavy and flat. The class was  
Twentieth-Century Poetics. I was starting  
with Descartes  
because the editor's introduction  
used the word CARTESIAN  
and I was scared  
the first sentence  
of the reading would make  
my students think



they couldn't understand  
an entire century  
because they would assume  
the word CARTESIAN stood for something  
they didn't know,  
rather than something  
they did know. Abstractly speaking,  
no person likes  
to feel stupid. And so

I continued:  
AND NOW ALL WE HAVE TO DO  
IS FIGURE OUT  
WHY THINKING  
MIGHT PROVE TO SOMEONE  
THAT SHE EXISTS.

We talked about self-consciousness,  
and how we can watch ourselves think  
and how when we watch ourselves think  
we are both subject and object  
and how the problem of modernity  
in many ways is that every subject  
is walking around  
turning everything  
into an object for himself.  
HISTORY, TOO,

HAS PREFERRED PRONOUNS, I said.  
(Actually, I didn't). That first day  
I had consciously chosen  
a linen shirt to wear  
not only because it was hot, but also  
to remember how I felt  
somewhere else outside  
of the university and outside  
of the country, somewhere where  
the political turmoil  
wasn't mine. I wanted to know  
just how foreign  
home could feel. I had  
bought the linen shirt  
a few weeks earlier in Greece  
on the island  
of Hydra, where I had gone to swim  
after I attended  
a poetry symposium in Athens, where I had been  
just a poet, not an employee  
of the state of Georgia, at least not  
in my mind. When I arrived  
in Athens, Greece,  
I said to the Greek poets, I'M FROM ATHENS,  
GEORGIA. At first,

I thought this was funny  
but later in a dismantled phone booth  
on the sidewalk  
next to the ticket booth  
for the Acropolis  
I saw graffiti that said,  
FROM BALTIMORE TO GREECE, FUCK  
THE POLICE. Gina took  
a picture of this exhibit  
on display in the very cradle  
of democracy  
because it connected  
our world to the ancients. Nearby  
on a large sign UNESCO  
explained the Acropolis  
to us in two sentences. In the first sentence  
we were told that  
ON THIS HILL WERE BORN  
DEMOCRACY, PHILOSOPHY,  
THEATER, FREEDOM OF  
EXPRESSION AND SPEECH. The sentence also said  
that these things were  
THE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL  
FOUNDATION FOR THE CONTEMPORARY  
WORLD AND ITS VALUES. The second sentence, though,



said that THE ACROPOLIS' MONUMENTS,  
HAVE SURVIVED FOR ALMOST TWENTY-FIVE CENTURIES  
THROUGH WARS, EXPLOSIONS, BOMBARDMENTS, FIRES, EARTHQUAKES,  
SACKINGS,  
INTERVENTIONS AND ALTERATIONS,  
which made me think  
the first sentence was  
just wishful thinking,  
because if democracy,  
philosophy, etc. were really  
the intellectual and spiritual  
foundation of our  
world, then there could not  
have been so many EXPLOSIONS, BOMBARDMENTS, SACKINGS,  
INTERVENTIONS AND ALTERATIONS trying  
to destroy it. Was the copywriter  
hired by UNESCO  
trying to communicate  
to heat-stroked tourists  
that liberal democracy was an aberration,  
a fragile  
possibility, snuffed out  
and weakened at every  
possible historical turn? Was her aim  
to remind us that political life

was most often  
orchestrated by a will  
to power backed by violence,  
despite the fact that  
her paid assignment  
was to celebrate the Acropolis? If so, what  
a genius, I thought.  
And as I walked through the ruins  
of democracy's spiritual and  
intellectual foundation  
I thought the terrain  
would be an excellent example  
to use with my students in explaining  
Charles Olson's famous paraphrase  
of Robert Creeley, FORM IS NEVER MORE  
THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. Maybe twenty-five  
centuries ago Robert Creeley  
should have warned  
the Greeks, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE,  
LOOK OUT WHERE YR GOING.  
When I was  
a kid the classroom  
was where I went  
because there was  
nowhere else

to go. For me, maybe  
because I lack  
imagination, there appeared  
no other route  
of escape. Sometimes now  
when I'm teaching, because I am  
an American, I think  
about what I would  
do, if someone  
started shooting at my students  
and me. I think  
the best thing  
would be for me  
to walk  
toward the shooter while  
speaking, so that the shooter  
couldn't easily abstract  
me and forget I was  
a real person. I always  
imagine saying something  
about my mother and  
his mother, as if reminding him  
that we each have  
someone, who would weep  
for us, as if remembering our

origins might help him  
stop what  
he's doing. The most popular semi-automatic  
rifles on the market  
fire 45 rounds per minute, so I probably  
wouldn't get a word  
out but maybe  
my body could block  
the shots from hitting  
my students who haven't  
lived as long as I have. I NEED TO GET  
IN THE WAY, I tell  
myself, as if it's more  
necessary to preserve a natural  
order than to save  
my own life. I tell myself,  
IT WOULD BE OK  
FOR ME TO DIE. I'VE ALREADY ESCAPED.  
I'M HERE. I don't know  
if I would want to live after something  
like that anyhow. They would have  
taken my classroom away from me. When I traveled  
through India with my mother,  
she saw a stray dog  
trying to nurse her puppies

in the gutter. My mother  
got very angry when she saw  
that the dog was hungry, maybe too hungry  
to make milk to feed  
her puppies. She demanded  
the children with us  
run into the kitchen and  
get food  
for the animal. Watching my mother  
feed the dog  
became one way  
for me to understand her. It also  
became a way for me  
to think about the relationship of empathy  
to action. Would my mother have demanded food  
for the dog, if the dog  
had had no puppies? Would she have felt  
the need to feed  
the dog, if my brother and I  
did not exist? Would I be willing  
to use my body  
to block a shooter anywhere  
or just in my classroom? If you go  
to school long enough  
you learn that modernity is just



a series of ways  
the self has tried  
to prove its own existence  
to itself, usually in ways  
that use other bodies  
to do so, like if Wordsworth  
sits on the grass and  
looks at a tree or  
a woman in a cottage  
what he mostly sees is how sensitive  
his own thinking about the tree  
or the woman in the cottage is and  
it makes him  
not only know  
that he exists but also feel  
that his existence  
is special, more special  
than the tree or the woman, or the way Wordsworth  
puts it, a poet  
is A MAN PLEASED  
WITH HIS OWN PASSIONS AND VOLITIONS, AND WHO  
REJOICES MORE THAN OTHER MEN  
IN THE SPIRIT OF LIFE  
THAT IS IN HIM. Being a good Romantic poet  
was a lot

like being a bad  
boyfriend, and you could  
get away with it  
because the tree or the woman in the cottage  
never turned to Wordsworth to say, William,  
you are making this all about yourself, what about  
my feelings? I don't know  
what it means to be  
a good poet today, but everyday  
I try to know and fail. What's interesting  
to me is that this way of perceiving  
a tree or a woman in a cottage  
is thought  
to be modern, that it's  
A modern problem. But I can't imagine  
how we might think in a way that doesn't divide the world  
into me and not me, even though  
in books some philosophers  
try to think a way out of  
this problem, try to dissolve  
the Cartesian subject. But did a medieval monk  
not understand himself as a subject  
in relationship to a world  
of objects? The answer is beyond  
my field of expertise. If this were

a game show, I would now ask to call a friend.  
I would call my friend,  
Jim Knowles, a medievalist. Hi, Jim, this  
is Maggie. Does a medieval subject  
divide the world into me and not me? Even if  
he doesn't, Jim,  
the language does, I would say,  
maybe just proving  
my own modernity. Grammar  
divides us. When I was walking  
to class the day we were  
to discuss Stein, I was  
a little nervous. POETRY & GRAMMAR  
is maybe a difficult essay, I thought. Then I thought,  
it's not that difficult. I still don't like  
TENDER BUTTONS and I don't  
really want to talk  
about it, but it's really  
famous and everybody thinks  
it's important, I thought, so I need to talk  
about it,  
I thought. I do still like LIFTING BELLY,  
because it says so many  
dirty things  
without ever saying

dirty things, I thought. Does this make me  
a simple person, I wondered. I didn't  
care and decided I would use  
LIFTING BELLY instead of TENDER BUTTONS  
to help explain Stein's essay. I had to be convinced  
of what I was talking about  
while trying to explain what Stein meant  
in POETRY & GRAMMAR,  
to explain what she meant  
when she wrote,  
I TOO FELT IN ME THE NEED  
OF MAKING IT BE A THING  
THAT COULD BE NAMED  
WITHOUT USING ITS NAME. I had to use  
a poem I liked. When I walked  
into class  
I was surprised that Collie said  
she liked Stein and I think  
Polina also said  
she liked Stein, or  
maybe it was Arielle. I thought  
then that I worried too much about students  
not liking Stein. I worried too much about students  
being scared of things that I think  
are maybe difficult, though neither

Collie nor Polina and/or Arielle said  
if they had liked TENDER BUTTONS. Shelby said  
she didn't get Stein, but Shelby always said  
she didn't get things  
when she did and  
later when I read Shelby's paper  
it was of course clear that Shelby got Stein,  
really got Stein. I knew that  
by the time we were through with Stein  
we would have to understand  
the difference between THINGS, THEIR NAMES, NOUNS, and NAMING  
but first we had to understand  
why Stein said  
WHAT POETRY IS IT IS A STATE OF KNOWING AND FEELING A NAME  
and how this connects to the idea  
that a name is  
A THING TO BE REMEMBERED. Or at least  
I was interested in how names and memory  
work together.  
Of course  
a name is a way to keep  
a thing in the world  
in yourself. We all know this  
even if we haven't said this  
to ourselves. We especially

know this  
when we are college students  
in love with someone eating a sandwich  
on the other side of the cafeteria.  
We say the person's name over and over and it makes us feel  
a little bit like the person is with us  
eating a sandwich but not enough  
with us for us to get  
bored and stop saying their  
name. The ideas in Stein  
aren't difficult. It's figuring out  
why she says these things the way  
she does that is maybe  
difficult or maybe just  
at first. But any college  
student, even a student at  
the business school, who  
will never read  
Stein, knows that this  
is why people repeat  
the name of someone  
eating a sandwich  
on the other  
side of the cafeteria.  
In class while teaching

Stein I kept repeating, MARIA,  
I JUST MET A GIRL  
NAMED MARIA, so that my students  
would understand this idea, so that my students  
would understand that  
they already were  
familiar with this  
idea, though I'm not sure  
if it was helpful. Do young  
people still know WEST SIDE  
STORY? I don't really  
know WEST SIDE STORY, but  
I know this line  
from this song. At home Gina and  
I sing this line  
in the voices  
of our dogs, in the voices  
we have made up  
for our dogs, but, as I often say  
in class after I say  
something irrelevant,  
that's neither here  
nor there. In any case,  
I always want to simply explain  
complex things without

simplifying the complexities  
and that's why I  
can't stop using the line  
from WEST SIDE STORY  
in class. But Stein's idea is maybe  
more complex  
than I make it. As a child,  
Stein says, she found her much older  
brother's love poems,  
and that's how she learned about  
poetry. In her description of  
her brother's poem  
the words Stein's brother wrote don't  
make the girl present,  
instead they make other things present.  
In the poem Stein's brother  
says his love has made him  
see everything  
in the world differently. He says he  
HAD OFTEN SAT AND LOOKED AT ANY  
LITTLE SQUARE OF GRASS  
AND IT HAD BEEN  
JUST A SQUARE OF  
GRASS AS GRASS IS,  
BUT NOW HE WAS IN LOVE AND SO



THE LITTLE SQUARE OF GRASS WAS ALL  
FILLED WITH BIRDS AND BEES AND BUTTERFLIES,  
THE DIFFERENCE WAS  
WHAT WAS LOVE.

Stein says, BEING IN LOVE MADE  
HIM MAKE POETRY, AND POETRY MADE HIM FEEL  
THE THINGS AND THEIR NAMES, AND SO

I REPEAT NOUNS  
ARE POETRY. Only now  
in reading this again  
and writing it with my own  
hands here is it clear  
to me that love

doesn't make him perceive things better, doesn't make  
his sense perceptions sharper, but instead  
love makes him write poetry and poetry makes

HIM FEEL THE THINGS AND  
THEIR NAMES. If love makes him want

to write poetry, does that mean  
love makes him want to feel  
things but love

needs poetry  
to make him feel those things  
through nouns? I'm not  
sure if Stein thinks

poetry makes us feel things  
that are here in the world,  
or things that are here in poetry.

What I mean is  
that before love

IT HAD BEEN JUST A SQUARE OF GRASS AS GRASS IS

for Stein's brother

but when Stein says

GRASS AS GRASS IS

does she mean

the GRASS before love was grass perceived

'correctly,' GRASS AS GRASS IS

verifiable through our sense perceptions,

and that after love, once love makes us

write poetry, the grass full

of names and nouns is only the grass

in the poem, not the grass in

the world? I'm not exactly

sure because she says,

POETRY MADE HIM FEEL THE THINGS AND THEIR NAMES

which makes me think that Stein's

brother doesn't feel things

in the world but only words

in the poem, that he's feeling the things

through the words, but I'm not sure

because Stein puts THE THINGS first  
in the sentence and then says THEIR NAMES. Is he really  
feeling things in the world or  
only things as nouns  
in the poem? And if he is only feeling nouns  
in a poem is it possible  
that this also allows him to feel  
things in the world, does poetry open him  
to the world or only  
to a world of words? It was a person  
in the world, a person he loved  
who excited him enough to want to feel things  
and wanting to feel things  
led to making  
poetry, to making a poetry  
that is a space in which to be  
excited about things and their names. So is love  
the link between the world and poetry?  
Maybe the point is that  
repeatedly reading Stein  
creates more ways  
to continue thinking  
about how the world and poetry need  
one another, might need one another, more ways  
to try to understand

the link between  
the world and poetry, more ways to understand  
how the link between the world  
and poetry explains what it means  
to be alive, explains what  
it feels like to be alive, which is just  
another way of saying I'm  
not exactly sure what Stein  
means. Her syntax here  
is ambiguous. What worries me most  
about my love of poetry  
is that I can't always understand  
what it has to do  
with being alive in the world, alive in a world  
that seems more and more  
about death, the death  
of the world itself. I like Stein's definition  
of poetry  
because it's what poetry  
sometimes feels like to me. It's why  
I like poetry with  
lots of concrete nouns,  
especially if they are concrete nouns  
that are surprising and  
unexpected in poetry, the kind of nouns

that are the names of things  
in the world  
but not the names of things  
that usually appear in poetry. It's a beautiful  
thing I think when a poem  
names something  
that hasn't until then appeared in poetry  
and in naming the thing  
that isn't a thing  
usually or ever to be named in poetry the poem  
names the thing but also  
still goes on being poetry. In those  
moments it feels to me  
as though poetry has just made itself  
bigger to hold the world that always  
is getting bigger and bigger. Maybe  
it's wrong for me to think  
this because Stein seems to be saying  
that poetry makes the world bigger; but I can't  
really control my thinking. I like  
to think  
all these things  
about poetry.  
It feels good, when most things  
in the world

right now  
feel bad. What is clear  
in any case is that love doesn't  
ever make Stein's brother sing,  
I JUST MET A GIRL NAMED MARIA  
like I said in class. Maybe  
the most important thing in Stein and  
something I think we did work  
out in class, maybe the most important thing  
Stein says is that names  
can get old, can stop working,  
that nouns meant  
to make us feel  
the things  
stop working  
as a way for us to feel  
the things  
because as Stein says  
by the time  
Whitman starts writing,  
WE WHO HAD KNOWN THE NAMES SO LONG DID NOT GET A THRILL  
FROM JUST KNOWING THEM.  
By the mid-nineteenth century  
nouns, Stein thinks, are worn out  
and that's why Whitman thinks

to use nouns in a new way. Now notice Stein  
uses the word THRILL,  
a word that means  
the vibrating or quivering of anything tangible  
or visible; acute tremulousness, as of a sound;  
a vibration, throbbing,  
a tremor. In other words, she uses a word,  
which is almost a dirty word. A word, which if we think  
about it long enough, signifies anything  
that works on us like  
a personal massager. I have  
on very rare occasions experienced  
poetry this way,  
very rarely, but the few times  
that I have, it was  
beautiful and it made me keep looking  
for words for my poems and in other people's poems  
to THRILL me and other  
people. And maybe this is what reading  
and writing poetry really is,  
a search for words that thrill us, a search for the words  
that will make us tremble  
in the presence of all that is in the world,  
even if all that is in the world is just  
words in a poem. This can't

be true, though, because there are too many poems that mean  
to be something other  
than a thrill. I would like it  
to be sometimes true. The poet's job for Stein is to make sure  
that the thrill  
is never gone and when the thrill starts to fade  
the way we use language and the way  
we make poetry  
has to change. So, for example,  
if we sing I JUST MET  
A GIRL NAMED MARIA and it feels  
instead like we are singing  
MARIA, WHERE ARE MY KEYS? poets  
need to do something. Stein says  
she COMMENCED TRYING TO DO  
SOMETHING IN TENDER BUTTONS  
ABOUT THIS THING. And though I like  
what Stein is saying here, TENDER BUTTONS  
doesn't thrill me, but LIFTING BELLY  
does. Like TENDER BUTTONS, LIFTING BELLY tries  
to find A WAY OF NAMING THINGS  
THAT WOULD NOT INVENT NAMES, BUT MEAN  
NAMES WITHOUT NAMING THEM, but LIFTING BELLY  
is about Gertrude  
trying to tell us



what it's like to have sex  
with Alice while  
never saying THIS IS WHAT IT'S  
LIKE TO HAVE SEX WITH ALICE,  
but making us all know  
that she is telling  
us what it's  
like to have sex  
with Alice. TENDER BUTTONS, on the other hand,  
is about mutton.  
Sex, I assume, is, for most  
people, more thrilling than  
mutton, especially for vegetarians.  
Stein, I also assume, knows that THRILL  
as a word, has something  
to do with sex. It's a word  
that has to do with trembling,  
with piercing, with penetrating, so I'm not sure  
why she thinks TENDER BUTTONS,  
which is a book  
of poetry about mutton  
would be THRILLING  
but of course who wouldn't say  
that LIFTING BELLY  
isn't THRILLING? And LIFTING

BELLY as a name falls into a long  
tradition of NAMES WITHOUT  
NAMING THEM because that's how people  
seem to have always talked  
about sex because sex  
is like love and it makes  
you want to make poems,  
to name things  
without naming them.

Like for instance, on the internet I found  
all these names that weren't  
in poems and weren't made by poets, but sound  
like they want to be  
in a poem like LIFTING BELLY,  
names like, CURTAIN TWITCHING, ENTANGLING  
THE LOWER BEARDS, FIDGETING THE MIDGET IN BRIDGET,  
FIXING THE CLAP FLAP, GOING HEELS-TO-JESUS,  
and so on. To be fair,  
there also were names  
that seemed to belong  
in TENDER BUTTONS. Names  
that made  
LIFTING BELLY sound  
like mutton. For example, MASHING THE FAT,  
HAVING HOT PUDDING FOR SUPPER,

LOCKING LEGS AND SWAPPING GRAVY,  
RUMMAGING IN THE ROOT CELLAR,  
AND PUDDLE-SNUGGLING. When LIFTING BELLY  
sounds like lifting mutton,  
I have to say, I don't feel like  
lifting anything. In class I didn't say  
any of these things  
because I was  
trying to be appropriate, though sometimes  
it's difficult to teach poetry as it actually is  
and not say things  
that some people  
would think weren't appropriate  
to say in a college classroom, but I didn't  
invent the history of poetry, I'm just  
the messenger. I can't avoid  
these things and still show my students  
what really is  
in the world and in poetry. When we talked  
about the phrase LIFTING BELLY  
as a way of naming something without using its name  
I for a second  
worried that the students wouldn't  
understand what LIFTING BELLY meant and for a second  
I was tempted

to do an Elvis pelvis  
which maybe would not have been appropriate for me  
to do as a professor and  
luckily I stopped myself. I reminded myself  
that these were college students  
and they were thinking mostly about  
LIFTING BELLY all the time  
because that's a lot of what it means  
to be a college  
student and I don't need to spell  
anything out. These things can exist  
as a wink wink and everyone  
understands. We looked at a poem in TENDER BUTTONS and  
I was honest  
and told my students  
that I didn't  
GET Tender Buttons and I said that  
when I use the word GET  
I mean I didn't FEEL TENDER BUTTONS and Stein  
herself said that the poem  
was supposed to make me FEEL the things and  
their names. I asked my students  
if anyone GOT TENDER BUTTONS and Ruth Anne who  
was always generous to poems  
and to words was able to show us how

she thought A LITTLE MONKEY GOES  
LIKE A DONKEY was for Stein a new way  
of saying DOG. And I was grateful for Ruth Anne  
because she showed us  
very quickly how TENDER BUTTONS worked. And to be honest  
I liked that passage because I have  
a little dog and I often call him MONKEY.  
What's clear here is that there's  
a difference between understanding and  
feeling. I understand  
TENDER BUTTONS, but I don't  
feel it. It doesn't THRILL me. The difference  
between TENDER BUTTONS and LIFTING BELLY  
illustrates the Cartesian  
mind/body split, or the problem  
for me is that TENDER BUTTONS asks  
readers to think instead of feel  
how Stein names things  
in new ways. She wants to renew  
perception, but perception in TENDER BUTTONS  
is defined as seeing. Our eyes  
often don't let us  
feel things but instead help us  
know things. That's why apprehend is  
a word sometimes used

in philosophy to describe  
how a person sees  
an object. So a writer might say,  
THE FACULTY OF VISION APPREHENDS OBJECTS  
IN THE WORLD. It's also the word  
we use to describe  
something the police do.  
So the woman on the news might say, POLICE OFFICERS  
APPREHENDED THREE TEENAGE  
SUSPECTS TODAY. In our world then  
we risk thinking that to know something is  
also to capture something, to control it. For this reason  
it seems to me  
that perceiving something  
only through sight might  
not be the same  
as the THRILL of names and naming  
Stein describes  
in POETRY & GRAMMAR. To be thrilled by something  
is to lose control  
in some small way. I've been careful  
most of my life  
not to say  
any of this  
in public because

everyone it seems  
loves TENDER BUTTONS and  
up until now  
I have been worried that  
if people knew  
I didn't like TENDER BUTTONS  
they would think  
I was stupid  
but recently I've started  
to care less  
about whether or not  
people think I am stupid. I think  
this means I am finally  
no longer a girl, but a woman. This only took  
forty-five years. I don't like TENDER BUTTONS.  
I don't like TENDER BUTTONS because  
I don't feel TENDER BUTTONS. It doesn't  
thrill me. There, I said it.  
In high school I had an English teacher, Mr. Bob Wicke,  
who would do things  
a teacher wasn't supposed to do,  
especially in Catholic high school. And that's why  
we liked him, that's why some  
of us liked him, why I liked  
him. For instance, one day just as

we were settling into  
our seats, Bob closed  
the classroom door and  
with a grand gesture turned off the intercom,  
so that we all knew  
Sr. Donna couldn't listen into the room. He then  
turned to us and said,  
CLASS, THERE IS NO GOD,  
and laughed and then he asked us  
to open our books,  
as if nothing had happened, as if  
he had said  
nothing at all. At the time  
we were all  
also in a religion class  
called CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE HONORS because  
we were HONORS students  
so we were always separated  
from the regular students  
except for gym. In CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE HONORS  
Joe Parks was my husband.  
He and I had to plan our wedding and  
create a budget to furnish our future house  
using catalogs we brought  
from home. We also had to take



a written test  
on all available birth control methods,  
a requirement imposed on the school  
by the state of New Jersey.  
Even though we had to show  
that we knew everything about each birth control method,  
we had also to show that  
as Catholics we knew we were not to use  
any birth control methods  
except for abstinence, but as Catholics  
we also knew what had happened  
to the Virgin Mary  
when she, like all of us  
in CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE HONORS, wasn't having sex.  
In CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE HONORS we also  
had to take a written test  
on HOMOSEXUALITY,  
on the OFFICIAL ROMAN CATHOLIC position  
on HOMOSEXUALITY. For some reason  
we all failed the HOMOSEXUALITY  
test. Mrs. Larkin, who had a theology degree  
from Princeton, was very angry  
that we had all failed. Of course we were  
all confused as to why someone with a degree  
from Princeton was stuck teaching us

about HOMOSEXUALITY but we were also very  
confused about why we had failed.  
As Mrs. Larkin reiterated to us what  
she believed to be a subtly nuanced  
theological position I remember  
all of us looking at each other in confusion  
and shouting, BUT THAT'S WHAT I WROTE!  
I imagine it didn't look  
good, if the entire CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
HONORS class failed the HOMOSEXUALITY  
test, so she made us  
retake it. Of course, we all passed.  
A year earlier, Joe and I  
had been in Rich Wicke's, Bob Wicke's  
younger brother's, English class. I had a crush  
on Rich Wicke because  
he was a poet and because he said things like  
ALL WOMEN SHOULD BECOME LESBIANS  
and because  
he and his wife  
had named their daughter Adrienne  
after a very famous lesbian poet,  
who I had never heard of before. Rich Wicke,  
when he should have been teaching us John Donne or  
Andrew Marvell poems, instead

often spent the fifty minute  
class period explaining  
the world to us. For instance, he explained to us  
how a traditional wedding ceremony  
symbolized the transference of property, i.e. the woman,  
from one man to another and  
that by taking her husband's name  
a woman was showing  
the world that she was  
her husband's property. Knowing these things  
complicated CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE HONORS  
for Joe and me. He and I wanted  
to have the kind of marriage that abolished  
all signs of the wife  
as property of the husband.  
We had the idea that instead of me  
taking Joe's last name,  
we would both  
change our last name  
to a new name, a combination of both our last names,  
Zurparkski, but when  
we told Mrs. Larkin  
that we wanted to be the Zurparkski family  
instead of Mr. and Mrs. Joe Parks,  
she said it would be fine, but only if we wrote

an essay about our reasons  
for going against tradition. Of course we immediately  
agreed to be Mr. and Mrs. Joe Parks.

No one really  
likes writing  
essays. We all  
thought Rich Wicke had more integrity than  
his brother, Bob, because although  
both men espoused feminist  
ideas in class, Rich Wicke didn't  
dye his hair blonde, or wear  
tight pants, or go  
to a tanning salon, or have  
a live-in girlfriend, who was much  
younger than he was. Bob's pants were so tight  
that we had to make jokes  
in the hallway  
behind his back  
about the state  
of his testicles. These things made us think  
that when Bob  
was telling us  
men are awful, when he was telling us  
that we should all  
become lesbians, he was also

maybe warning us  
about himself. A pair of pants  
made us consider all of this. In other words,  
we already knew  
that FORM IS ONLY  
AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT, though  
we didn't know  
we knew it. One day in Bob's class  
we read Sartre's  
NO EXIT aloud. Bob picked Kathryn,  
one of the only cheerleaders  
in the Honors program, to read the part  
of Estelle, the straight woman. He chose me  
to play Inez, the lesbian, and  
he himself read  
the part of Garcin, the straight man. Or maybe  
Kathryn and I volunteered to play  
the parts. I don't  
remember. But for fifty minutes  
I got to make passes  
at Kathryn, Kathryn got  
to make passes at Bob, and Bob got  
to make passes at me. Years later  
I learned that the play  
was about how the self struggles

when it sees  
itself as an object  
from the point of view of  
another self. Back then, though,  
in Bob Wicke's class  
the play for me was about the thrill  
of being seen by other people  
in the same way  
I saw and felt myself. NO EXIT  
created a feeling of freedom  
in my world, a freedom hidden behind  
the closed doors  
of Bob's classroom. Ten years ago  
I learned from a friend, who had also been in  
Bob's class, that Bob  
had lost his job, that he had been put  
on trial. The local paper  
reported that Bob had received  
sexual favors from a female  
student in exchange for  
a good grade. When I told my father,  
who was always the one to go  
to parent/teacher conferences, he said  
he wasn't surprised. He, too, had seen  
Bob's pants. On Facebook

another friend said she didn't care  
about the news. Bob's class  
had saved her life. I understood what she meant.  
He and Rich had saved my life.  
When I think about Bob, I still  
get mad at him  
for not realizing it was a problem  
that though he told us  
there were many  
good books written  
by women, he never taught  
a single one of them. When I get mad  
at Bob for this, I wonder  
if there's something  
wrong with me  
that this is the thing  
I feel mad at him for. I get that he did  
many other things wrong, but I feel  
this one. It's hard not to think  
my feeling, then, is self-interested,  
especially as I type.





AFTER-WORDS



A LINE OF FLIGHT  
A CONVERSATION WITH  
MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI

Greetings! Thank you for talking to us about your process today! Can you introduce yourself, in a way that you would choose?

*I'm a poet and teacher, living in Athens, GA.*

Why are you a poet/writer/artist?

*Because it allows conversations to happen. Conversations that need to happen. Conversations that otherwise wouldn't happen.*

When did you decide you were a poet/writer/artist (and/or: do you feel comfortable calling yourself a poet/writer/artist, what other titles or affiliations do you prefer/feel are more accurate)?

*I woke up one morning at the age of 13 and went to my desk and wrote a poem after having a strange dream. From then on I felt dedicated to poetry.*

What's a "poet" (or "writer" or "artist") anyway?

*A poet is someone who constructs forms out of words.*

What do you see as your cultural and social role (in the literary / artistic / creative community and beyond)?

*I take teaching seriously. The classroom for me was a problematic but life-changing space, a line of flight. I feel obligated to make it that kind of space for my students. Sometimes I fall short, but I try. I take local and state politics seriously after the GA legislature made guns legal in my classroom. I work on campaigns etc. My motivation there is making sure there's some sort of viable reality for my students to inherit. It seems like we're losing on that front at the moment, but I'll be working on campaigns here in GA over the coming year.*

Talk about the process or instinct to move these poems (or your work in general) as independent entities into a body of work. How and why did this happen?

*This piece is what I've been calling an essay with line breaks. Given that my classroom has been under attack in several ways, it felt important to take the experience of teaching and my relationship with my students seriously, to externalize everything that is taking place for me when I enter the classroom. It seemed important, too, that my students might be able to read it.*

Speaking of monikers, what does your title represent? How was it generated?

*When I was a grad student at Duke I got to study and to know Fred Moten. One day, I think in seminar, he mentioned that he wanted to teach a course called "Don't Be Scared." The reading list would be all those huge works of literature people often are too scared to read. I remember *The Making of Americans* being on the list and *Pamela*. The discussion of this fantasy course was an aside, if I remember correctly, but something that I think about often because "Don't Be Scared" is in many ways the perfect classroom philosophy.*

*Students are scared of not understanding things, of appearing to not understand something, etc. My job is to let them know they don't have to be scared. They can think out loud, be wrong, confused, etc. and it's all important and helpful for the work we're doing together. When I started to write this piece about teaching, I was fixated on a memory of having to get students past the word Cartesian on the first day of a poetics class. That word felt like an opportunity because it turns what is essentially at this point a cliché ("I think therefore I am") into a capitalized adjective, an intimidating academic term that seems to stand for a whole world beyond what a student who is first encountering philosophy, theory, or poetics thinks she knows. But of course people who have never even set foot on a college campus have likely heard the phrase "I think therefore I am" as a punchline on a 70s sitcom or something. I bet there are even some business majors who have heard the phrase. Anyhow, it's a good first lesson in showing students that they don't need to be scared of not knowing something. Cartesian is just a name you don't know for an idea you do know. Don't be scared.*

What does this book DO (as much as what it says or contains)? What would be the best possible outcome for this book? What might it do in the world, and how will its presence as an object facilitate your creative role in your community and beyond? What are your hopes for this book, and for your practice?

*This book is an acknowledgement that my students are the people with whom I think and talk about art most intensely. The economic situation of poets in America has created a kind of diasporic poetry community. Many of us are bound to some campus. And even if we're in major cities, we can't really afford to live in neighborhoods alongside each other. Even in NY it seems no one can afford to live around The Poetry Project anymore. NY poets have a long commute to reach what used to be a neighborhood's poetry space. So this piece is an effort to take seriously the community I create with my students, to take seriously the thinking about poetry that happens with and through them. They are on a daily basis my poetry friends. My other poetry family is less integrated into my daily life.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MAGDALENA ZURAWSKI is the author of *The Tiniest Muzzle Sings Songs of Freedom* (Wave Books 2019), the novel *The Bruise*, which won the Ronald Sukenick Award from FC2 in 2008 and a LAMBDA literary award in 2009, and the collection of poems *Companion Animal*, which was published by Litmus Press in 2015 and won a Norma Faber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America. She attended Brown University where she studied with poets Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop, C.D. Wright, and Peter Gizzi. She has lived in Berlin, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Durham, NC where she ran the Minor American Reading Series. She is currently Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia.

## ABOUT THE COVER ART:

The Operating System 2019 chapbooks, in both digital and print, feature art from Heidi Reszies. The work is from a series entitled "Collected Objects & the Dead Birds I Did Not Carry Home," which are mixed media collages with encaustic on 8 x 8 wood panel, made in 2018.

Heidi writes: "This series explores objects/fragments of material culture—how objects occupy space, and my relationship to them or to their absence."

## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Heidi Reszies is a poet/transdisciplinary artist living in Richmond, Virginia. Her visual art is included in the National Museum of Women in the Arts CLARA Database of Women Artists. She teaches letterpress printing at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, and is the creator/curator of Artifact Press. Her poetry collection titled *Illusory Borders* is forthcoming from The Operating System in 2019, and now available for pre-order. Her collection titled *Of Water & Other Soft Constructions* was selected by Samiya Bashir as the winner of the Anhinga Press 2018 Robert Dana Prize for Poetry (forthcoming in 2019).

Find her at [heidireszies.com](http://heidireszies.com)

## WHY PRINT DOCUMENT?

*The Operating System uses the language “print document” to differentiate from the book-object as part of our mission to distinguish the act of documentation-in-book-FORM from the act of publishing as a backwards-facing replication of the book’s agentive \*role\* as it may have appeared the last several centuries of its history. Ultimately, I approach the book as TECHNOLOGY: one of a variety of printed documents (in this case, bound) that humans have invented and in turn used to archive and disseminate ideas, beliefs, stories, and other evidence of production.*

*Ownership and use of printing presses and access to (or restriction of) printed materials has long been a site of struggle, related in many ways to revolutionary activity and the fight for civil rights and free speech all over the world. While (in many countries) the contemporary quotidian landscape has indeed drastically shifted in its access to platforms for sharing information and in the widespread ability to “publish” digitally, even with extremely limited resources, the importance of publication on physical media has not diminished. In fact, this may be the most critical time in recent history for activist groups, artists, and others to insist upon learning, establishing, and encouraging personal and community documentation practices. Hear me out.*

*With The OS’s print endeavors I wanted to open up a conversation about this: the ultimately radical, transgressive act of creating PRINT /DOCUMENTATION in the digital age. It’s a question of the archive, and of history: who gets to tell the story, and what evidence of our life, our behaviors, our experiences are we leaving behind? We can know little to nothing about the future into which we’re leaving an unprecedentedly digital document trail — but we can be assured that publications, government agencies, museums, schools, and other institutional powers that be will continue to leave BOTH a digital and print version of their production for the official record. Will we?*

*As a (rogue) anthropologist and long time academic, I can easily pull up many accounts about how lives, behaviors, experiences — how THE STORY of a time or place — was pieced together using the deep study of correspondence, notebooks, and other physical documents which are no longer the norm in many lives and practices. As we move our creative behaviors towards digital note taking, and even audio and video, what can we predict about future technology that is in any way assuring that our stories will be accurately told — or told at all? How will we leave these things for the record?*

*In these documents we say: WE WERE HERE, WE EXISTED, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY*

*- Lynne DeSilva-Johnson [ELÆ], Founder/Managing Editor,  
THE OPERATING SYSTEM, Brooklyn NY 2019*



## SELECTED RECENT AND FORTHCOMING OS PRINT/DOCUMENTS

- ARK HIVE-Marthe Reed [2019]  
A Bony Framework for the Tangible Universe-D.Allen [kin(d)\*, 2019]  
Y - Lori Anderson Moseman  
Śnienie / Dreaming - Marta Zelwan/Krystyna Sakowicz,  
(Polish-English/dual-language) trans.Victoria Miluch [glossarium, 2019]  
Opera on TV-James Brunton [kin(d)\*, 2019]  
Alparegho: Pareil-À-Rien / Alparegho, Like Nothing Else - H  l  ne Sanguinetti  
(French-English/dual-language), trans. Ann Cefola [glossarium, 2019]  
Hall of Waters-Berry Grass [kin(d)\*, 2019]  
High Tide OfThe Eyes - Bijan Elahi (Farsi-English/dual-language)  
trans. Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian [glossarium, 2019]  
I Made for You a New Machine and All it Does is Hope - Richard Lucyshyn [2019]  
Illusory Borders-Heidi Reszies [2019]  
Transitional Object-Adrian Silbernagel [kin(d)\*, 2019]  
A Year of Misreading the Wildcats [2019]  
An Absence So Great and Spontaneous It Is Evidence of Light - Anne Gorrick [2018]  
The Book of Everyday Instruction - Chloe Bass [2018]  
Executive Orders Vol. II - a collaboration with the Organism for Poetic Research [2018]  
One More Revolution - Andrea Mazzariello [2018]  
The Suitcase Tree - Filip Marinovich [2018]  
Chlorosis - Michael Flatt and Derrick Mund [2018]  
Sussuros a Mi Padre - Erick S  enz [2018]  
Sharing Plastic - Blake Nemece [2018]  
The Book of Sounds - Mehdi Navid (Farsi dual language, trans.Tina Rahimi) [2018]  
In Corpore Sano : Creative Practice and the Challenged Body [Anthology, 2018];  
Lynne DeSilva-Johnson and Jay Besemer, co-editors  
Abandoners - Lesley Ann Wheeler [2018]  
Jazzercise is a Language - Gabriel Ojeda-Sague [2018]  
Return Trip / Viaje Al Regreso - Israel Dominguez;  
(Spanish-English dual language) trans. Margaret Randall [2018]  
Born Again - Ivy Johnson [2018]  
Attendance - Roc   Carlos and Rachel McLeod Kaminer [2018]  
Singing for Nothing - Wally Swist [2018]  
The Ways of the Monster - Jay Besemer [2018]

## THE 2019 OS CHAPBOOK SERIES

### PRINT TITLES:

Vela - Knar Gavin  
[零] A Phantom Zero - Ryu Ando  
Don't Be Scared - Magdalena Zurawski  
Re:Verses - Kristina Darling & Chris Campanioni

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### DIGITAL TITLES:

American Policy Player's Guide and Dream Book - Rachel Zolf  
The George Oppen Memorial BBQ - Eric Benick  
Flight OfThe Mothman - Gyasi Hall  
Mass Transitions - Sue Landers  
The Grass Is Greener When The Sun Is Yellow - Sarah Rosenthal & Valerie Witte  
From Being Things, To Equalities In All - Joe Milazzo  
These Deals Won't Last Forever - Sasha Amari Hawkins  
Ventriloquy - Bonnie Emerick  
A Period Of Non-Enforcement - Lindsay Miles  
Quantum Mechanics : Memoirs Of A Quark - Brad Baumgartner  
Hara-Kiri On Monkey Bars - Anna Hoff

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[HTTPS://SQUAREUP.COM/STORE/THE-OPERATING-SYSTEM/](https://squareup.com/store/the-operating-system/)

THE 2019 SERIES MARKS OUR 7TH AND FINAL SPRING 4-BOOK SERIES  
THANK YOU TO ALL THE WONDERFUL CREATORS BEHIND THESE TITLES

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2018 :TALES

Greater Grave - Jacq Greyja; Needles of Itching Feathers - Jared Schlicking;  
Want-Catcher - Adra Raine; We, The Monstrous - Mark DuCharme

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2017 : INCANTATIONS

featuring original cover art by Barbara Byers  
sp. - Susan Charkes; Radio Poems - Jeffrey Cyphers Wright;  
Fixing a Witch/Hexing the Stitch - Jacklyn Janekselä;  
cosmos a personal voyage by carl sagan ann druyan steven sotor and me - Connie Mae Oliver

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2016: OF SOUND MIND

\*featuring the quilt drawings of Daphne Taylor  
Improper Maps - Alex Crowley; While Listening - Alaina Ferris;  
Chords - Peter Longofono; Any Seam or Needlework - Stanford Cheung

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2015: OF SYSTEMS OF

\*featuring original cover art by Emma Steinkraus  
Cyclorama - Davy Knittle; The Sensitive Boy Slumber Party Manifesto - Joseph  
Cuillier; Neptune Court - Anton Yakovlev; Schema - Anurak Saelow

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2014: BY HAND

Pull, A Ballad - Maryam Parhizkar;  
Can You See that Sound - Jeff Musillo  
Executive Producer Chris Carter - Peter Milne Greiner;  
Spooky Action at a Distance - Gregory Crosby;

CHAPBOOK SERIES 2013: WOODBLOCK

\*featuring original prints from Kevin William Reed  
Strange Coherence - Bill Considine; The Sword of Things - Tony Hoffman;  
Talk About Man Proof - Lancelot Runge / John Kropa;  
An Admission as a Warning Against the Value of Our Conclusions - Alexis Quinlan

# DOC U MENT

/dəkyəmənt/

First meant “instruction” or “evidence,” whether written or not.

*noun* - a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record  
*verb* - record (something) in written, photographic, or other form  
*synonyms* - paper - deed - record - writing - act - instrument

[Middle English, *precept*, from Old French, from Latin *documentum*, example, proof, from *docere*, to teach; see *dek-* in Indo-European roots.]

## Who is responsible for the manufacture of value?

Based on what supercilious ontology have we landed in a space where we vie against other creative people in vain pursuit of the fleeting credibilities of the scarcity economy, rather than freely collaborating and sharing openly with each other in ecstatic celebration of MAKING?

While we understand and acknowledge the economic pressures and fear-mongering that threatens to dominate and crush the creative impulse, we also believe that ***now more than ever we have the tools to relinquish agency via cooperative means***, fueled by the fires of the Open Source Movement.

Looking out across the invisible vistas of that rhizomatic parallel country we can begin to see our community beyond constraints, in the place where intention meets resilient, proactive, collaborative organization.

Here is a document born of that belief, sown purely of imagination and will.

When we document we assert. We print to make real, to reify our being there.

When we do so with mindful intention to address our process, to open our work to others, to create beauty in words in space, to respect and acknowledge the strength of the page we now hold physical, a thing in our hand... we remind ourselves that, like Dorothy: *we had the power all along, my dears.*

## THE PRINT! DOCUMENT SERIES

*is a project of*

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