

5a~Kristin Prevallet to Jackson Mac Low.**“gathering vs. collecting”**

June 8, 2001

Dear Jackson:

I just received your *20 Forties*, published by the generous and indefatigable Manuel Brito of the Canary Islands (Zasterle Press). I will describe the cover for those who may not have seen it: an enlarged handwritten page from a notebook, most of the ink brown, additions and/or revisions to the text in gray and red. “Forties” involved, your preface states, a process of “gathering” words, phrases, word strings, and sentences that you “saw, heard, or thought of” while writing and traveling since 1990. These unsorted, nondiscriminatory jottings were then revised. Each poem has a “fuzzy verse form”: 8 stanzas of 5 lines – 3 lines moderately long, then a fourth very long, followed by a short line. At the bottom of each “Forties,” there is (in addition to notational instructions on how to read the poem) a brief record of the occasion of writing and the locations through which the text was initially filtered: a train, airplane, foreign countries, New York, a poetry reading, lecture, etc.

I imagine that this process of “gathering” language must be essentially relational and somewhat incoherent, in that you hear everything at once but only write when your pen – thinking thoughts – and ear – barraged by the simultaneity of sounds – connect. Reading the “Forties,” I am struck by a language that glides across the tip-of-the-tongue, not resonating in specific thoughts but rather in the connections made with other words, phrases and stanzas, hybrid vocalizations jamming together multiple languages, accents and sounds in an anti-melody of simultaneous verbal nonsense and sonar resonance:

Rattler pragmaticist teaspoon narcotic corroborate doleful magnificence
 glassblower classicism moral tyrannosphere galley-slave drapery fullness
 chlorophyll metal detector derision benumb bubble universe number
 coriander leave-taking nodding acquaintance monastic incriminate
 witnesses flashingly searchlight Geronimo carpenter
 diamonds agglomerate fantasy (*20 Forties*, 36)

To me, a poetics of “gathering” seems to involve a direct confrontation of the space of the poem with the outside world. This may be what poetry always does, always has done. Occasions might be *documented* by poets in their poems (a recounting), but this is different from “gathering.” Taking one’s thoughts and representing them through poetry is also different from a poetry such as yours that roams through the outside world of materials – bringing them into the poem.

I am thinking now of the poem you wrote 35 years ago and that you have just sent me, “Marines Defend Burning of Village – 6 August 1965.” I really appreciate how your text disrupts the field of the information (the way the massacre was reported, the language used, the images), but still reveals the pertinent content (the horror of the atrocity, the human relevance). The piece is respectful of the tragic event, the larger context of the war, and the people who were killed; but at the same time, it comments on the way language is used to simultaneously represent and manipulate such stories, which then come into our minds as unalloyed images, isolated from the larger issues of war, power, and control of information.

Marines Defend Burning of Village -- 6 August 1965 -- by Jackson Mac L.

Military spokesman outlined today for the first time some of the combat rules set down for American marines fighting in South Vietnam.

Danang, marines' behavior in military operations had raised questions about their treatment of Vietnamese civilians.

"Marines do not burn houses or villages unless those houses or villages are fortified," marines sweeping through the village of Camme south of Danang, marines had first considered that the village was Communist controlled.

Marines were wounded by small-arms fire.

Discovered mounds of Vietcong propaganda literature.

"Be far more elaborate than mere protection of their homes would require" the spokesman said.

Difficult to determine who should be classified as Vietcong since they discover that both young and old may be assisting the Communist forces.

Sweep through Camme last month, woman fired on the marines, according to the spokesman.

strophe
((column 2--~~strophe~~ break between columns))

Basement leading to a concrete tunnel complex, "burned" the spokesman said "but I can't say whether it was done in this case."

Marines' behavior in military operations had raised questions about their treatment of Vietnamese civilians.

Down for American marines fighting in South Vietnam.

"Fortified," setting fire to huts despite the pleas of villagers.

Village that read "Expel the Americans from Vietnam" and discovered mounds of Vietcong propaganda literature.

Of them concrete, "of their homes would require" the spokesman said.

Villages in Vietnam were fortified to some degree, killed by gunfire intended for a fleeing adult man, only civilian casualty the marines reported in the Camme operation.

page 2 of Marines Defend Burning of Village -- 6 August 1965 -- by J Mac Low --page 2

((column 3--strophe break between columns))

NO
((column 4--strophe break between columns))

Seal tunnels and trenches, company commander had ordered the action because the house, during their sweep.

← [sic]

Outlined today for the first time some of the combat rules set down for American marines fighting in South Vietnam.

Marines' behavior in military operations had raised questions about their treatment of Vietnamese civilians.

"Marines do not burn houses or villages unless those houses or villages are fortified," marines sweeping through the village of Camme south of Danang, marines had first considered that the village was Communist controlled.

Marines were wounded by small-arms fire.

Concrete, marines reported in the Camme operation.

Difficult to determine who should be classified as Vietcong since they discover that both young and old may be assisting the Communist forces.

Were set afire when flamethrowers and grenades, "before houses are burned"

the spokesman said "but I can't say whether it was done in this case."

Interpreters accompanied the marines during their sweep(?).

Marines fighting in South Vietnam.

Considered that the village was Communist controlled.

By ~~xxx~~ small-arms fire.

Tunnels, "far more elaborate than mere protection of their homes would require" the spokesman said.

When a reporter remarked that a great majority of the villages in Vietnam were fortified in some degree, gunfire intended for a fleeing adult man, finding it difficult to determine who should be classified as Vietcong since they discover that both young and old may be assisting the Communist forces.

Leading to a concrete tunnel complex, of the operation.

Of the combat rules set down for American marines fighting in South Vietnam.

page 3 of Marines Defend Burning of Village--6 August 1965--by Jackson Mac Low--page 3

((column 5--strophe break between columns))

((column 6--NO strophe break between columns))

Vietnamese
civilians.

liberately with his cigarette
lighter.

"Villages unless those houses
or villages are fortified,"
village of
Camme south of Danang,
villagers.

He said the company
commander had ordered the ac-
tion because the house,
"before
houses are burned"
the spokes-
man said
"but I can't say
whether it was done in this
case."

Village was
Communist controlled.

Interpreters accom-
panied the marines during ~~their~~ ther
sweep(?).

Village
that read
"Expel the Americans
from Vietnam"
and discovered
mounds of Vietcong propaganda
literature.

Marine set a house on fire de-
liberately with his cigarette
lighter.

Marine com-
manders
"considered to be far
more elaborate than mere pro-
tection of their homes would
require"
the spokesman said.

Marines' report.

Majority of the
villages in Vietnam were
fortified to some degree,
marines reported
in the Camme operation.

Were
set afire when flamethrowers
and grenades,
ignited connecting houses,
marines,
marines were finding it difficult
to determine who should be clas-
sified as Vietcong since they
discover that both young and
old may be assisting the Com-
munist forces.

Marines were finding it difficult
to determine who should be clas-
sified as Vietcong since they
discover that both young and
old may be assisting the Com-
munist forces.

Marines reported
in the Camme operation.

During a sweep through
Camme last month,
marines,
tun-
nels and trenches,
de-

Degree,
text and said,
"before
houses are burned"
the spokes-
man said
"but I can't say
whether it was done in this
case."

FOOTNOTE TO BE APPENDED TO "Marines Defend Burning of Village--6 August 1965"

All phrases appearing in this poem have been drawn from "Marines Defend Burning of Village," a special dispatch to The New York Times, written in Saigon, 5 August 1965, by Jack Langguth, and published on page 3 of the "Late City Edition" of the Times, Friday, 6 August 1965, the 20th anniversary of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. The phrases were drawn--in the order (including all repetitions) in which they appear in the poem--by means of systematic chance operations deriving from the letters of the title of the news article.

The appearance of the spelling "ther" for "their" I owe to the Times's proofreaders. The poem is to be read with short breath pauses at ends of lines, longer pauses at ends of stanzas.

Jackson Mac Low

6 August 1965

965 Hoe Avenue

Bronx New York 10459 USA

I too have been actively investigating how language is wrapped up in everyday information. I have devised a method of “collecting” information and incorporating it, along with its source, into the body of the poem. This impulse to bring in materials comes from the need to create forms that accommodate language as it is heard and sounded and thought everyday. I have been inspired by the method-based poetics that you have practiced in the past, by the gathering process of *20 Forties*, and by the “investigative poetics” of Ed Sanders (1968: *A History in Verse*), Olson (*Maximus*), and Williams (*Paterson*).

Which brings me to my letter: I am interested in how to distinguish “gathering” from “collecting.” I think I “collect” and do not “gather.” I intentionally collect newspaper stories for inclusion in my poems, whereas in contrast, there seems to be a passive (in the Buddhist sense) openness to your “gathering” that allows what is gathered to enter the poem as if by chance, or incidentally. “Collecting” involves a certain focusing on a means to an end. I collect, for example, newspaper clippings because I see newspapers as chaotic bundles of information, temporarily absorbed, then discarded by readers. There are “glitches” in newspaper stories: pieces of information that normally would be overlooked by the reader. I collect these glitches and categorize them in order to file them for later use. For example, in a recent *New York Times* story regarding the murder of the Royal Family in Nepal, there is the line: “How can we expect justice from a king who is the prime suspect himself?” asked a protester who was relaxing on a pile of bamboo poles.” The bamboo poles, upon which an unnamed man is contemplating the limitations of jurisprudence and justice, are presumably irrelevant information – a glitch in the story. I find this detail relevant for a collector. The story goes into the “conspiracy” category file. It remains to be seen what form it takes in my poem.

I don't think “gathering” and “collecting” are, however, opposed processes from every angle. A gatherer cannot help but collect (sounds, rhythms, words, etc.), while a collector cannot deny a rather randomly gathered process of addition and subtraction (this fragment from a newspaper story and not that one). Both gathering and collecting involve making associations, and finding a form for the presentation of information. It doesn't matter whether the form (and by that I mean the poem) is “fragmented” or “smooth” to the eye and ear; in either case, collected or gathered texts are both working to “break habits” of thought (as Silliman would say a poem should do), readerly assumptions, language-use, and those ever-pervasive socio-cultural definitions of meaning and beauty.

In the “Disgust & Overdetermination” issue of *Open Letter*, I found myself agreeing with Jeff Derksen's definition of the “overdetermined” poetic text as “an impulse ... not towards synthesis or unity ... but towards the stacking up, the overloading, the spilling over of contradictions” (8). And yet, although I think I am working in an “overdetermined” manner by bringing the outside world of information-based language into my poetic practice, my work does not fit Derksen's criteria of overdetermination. I don't know if this is because his criteria are too specific (he lists “a refusal to cite sources” and “a disregard for ‘literary’ qualities,” two things that I neither refuse nor disregard) or if my work, in its “collector” mode, is in disagreement with his larger claims. So, like the term “overdetermination,” the term “gathering” is very interesting to me. Both terms seem to at once identify and fail to identify what I am trying to do.

My collecting has also been inspired by the work of Melissa Kern (sculptor, painter, set designer, videomaker) who came up with the idea to leave “messages” for specific people, and to not make them directly aware that they have messages waiting. For example, she put a message inside of a balloon, blew up the balloon, and tied the balloon to a particular tree. The person designated to be the recipient of the message passed by that tree every day. But this person never knew, when looking at the tree or balloon (if either was even noticed), that there was a personal message there.

In response to her project, I took my video camera with me everywhere I went for one week (my work takes me through four different neighborhoods in New York City each week, from Graham Ave [Williamsburg] to Queens Boulevard [Elmhurst] to Fulton Street [Fort Greene]). I had it slung across my back, or held it dangling at street level. For 5 minutes each day I turned it on, but without aiming at anything in particular. In other words, my eye was not directing the viewfinder; consequently because it was moving in its own direction, the camera picked up details that I would never have noticed.

Next, I ran the video through my computer, and searched for what I considered to be the “messages” in the midst of the random, jumpy footage. I then catalogued the still images – the messages – into categories: passers-by, reflections, gumballs, detergents, heating vents, signs, stores, etc. So, this is a method of organizing chaos, of cataloguing randomness. It is an attempt to see “The Street” as a site where we cannot see everything we are passing, as much as we actively look and pay attention. Then, I wrote text to accompany these collected, catalogued images. The text is an attempt to forge *connections* between the images / messages – a process that seems to be directly opposed, in some sense, to the intents of your own

works as I understand them. I imagine that you would use the randomly generated images not to “make sense,” but to evoke even more randomness. (This project, “A Catalogue of Lost Glimpses,” appears in the Spring 2001 issue of the Web magazine Streetnotes.)

What I am conscious of doing when searching for stilled “messages” is directing my artistic “eye” to make sense out of the footage. No doubt, as writers we all try to “make sense” of the various signals and signs of the world. But I am not sure you would go so far as to agree with me when I say that as a writer, I am transmitting information (in both raw and catalogued forms) from the world to the reader. It doesn't matter if this transmitted information is fragmented, noisy, contradictory, relational, nonsensical, or chance derived. In *20 Forties*, the poems are organized, because of the fact that they were gathered from social surroundings, and processed through a form. The text may challenge our perceptions of reading, meaning, language-use, and the functions of an author, but the fact remains: the text itself – its formal presentation, organization, and final assemblage into a book – is directed. Do you agree? And if it is directed, then what is the information that it is conveying from, or about, the world to the reader?

I should end by offering an apology – I have used *20 Forties* to reflect back onto my own work. This is not quite what I had assumed would happen in composing this letter. In fact, this letter began as a letter to Caroline Bergvall. It is an “open letter” in that sense – floating between the many people who are in my mind as I write.

Kristin Prevallet