

Transitive

Helen was never in Troy. She had been transposed or translated from Greece into Egypt. ... The Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion. —H.D.

I am always the woman in red.
I am always huddling in some round room.
Even when I am not wearing red, I am still the woman in red.
To be forever single is like wearing a flag to a funeral.
“It is always more satisfying to harbor a secret crush,” Helen
warned Paris, but neither he nor the thousand ships was listening.
Helen in Egypt’s identity crisis is attributed to the author’s:
“Did you see H.D. in *Borderline*? She looked like a heroin
addict before heroin was even a thing.” Opted instead
for mediums, furniture rattling, Freud.
“I hear James Franco is playing H.D. in a new bio flick
from Focus Features.” I am confusing the story of H.D.’s death
with the story of Gertrude Stein’s, Bryher a stand-in
for Alice B. Toklas, gender expression reversed.
Q: What is the answer? A: In that case, what is the question?
I feel least black around those who are confident
of their blackness. I feel least queer when told
I can’t be a butch so I must be a femme.
I am I because I will never learn to drive.
Life structured toward a pedestrian mobility.
I take a bus. Passing under numerous bridges.
And stop outside a museum. Beside a statue of Helen.
In Egypt or Troy? (Do I wear my skin like a costume
or a uniform? Do I wear my hair like a fountain?)

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<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/09/poetry/russell>

Pittsburgh

My cat, Neruda, began to pull out his own fur three months after our arrival in Pittsburgh—roughly around the time I installed a pet gate to prevent him from leaving the apartment, flying down three flights of stairs, and squeezing into the crawl space beyond the basement wall, where he used to cavort with god-knows-what sort of vermin and ingest potential poisons. I would call out wheedlingly, waving handfuls of catnip, and when that was not enough to compel him out, “kitty caviar” (some marketer’s name for processed fish flakes), but Neruda kept raising the stakes until finally no bribe would suffice. He would emerge in his own good time with spider webs and the occasional insect carcass dangling from his ears and tail.

Once as I waited impatiently I heard Neruda scratching frantically somewhere beneath the house. I worried that he would die there, beneath the Victorian mansion where I rent a two-room turret apartment, the proverbial “garret” under the eaves. When Neruda extracted himself and finally appeared under the basement stairs, just within reach, I grabbed him by the throat and hauled him out. It probably took a second, but for days after I felt him choking in my hands.

Now banned from the basement, Neruda watches birds from the apartment’s many windows, or this afternoon, turns his back on a sky full of gray, the conical rooftop appendage above us slewing elongated single raindrops like drool.

If you’d told my fifteen-year-old self that I would one day reside in the underbelly of a cone, I would have demanded documentary evidence. Sitting through Geometry for the second time, I complained about having to find the volume of a shape that does not occur in nature. “There are only three kinds of cones in the world,” I told the class. “Traffic cones, party hat cones, and Madonna cones.” I was not yet aware of Victorian rooftop cones that hawk loogies lingeringly out of pace with the surrounding downpour.

When I was a child, my grandparents had an impressionistic picture I will call “Rain.” In the picture people walk on city streets, wielding umbrellas in wavy streaks. We did not get much rain in Los Angeles, and when we did I did not have much opportunity to walk in it. I was not allowed out unsupervised until I was nearly fourteen, as now I will not let Neruda venture beyond the safety of our two-room flat. I ask myself if this is selfish, as my mother now asks—to be so reliant on another’s survival that you hamper their freedom to risk.

When I was seven or eight, my parents gave me a Dr. Seuss publication called *My Book About Me*. The book posed questions, and the child was supposed to supply the requested information. When asked the number of steps from my home to the nearest postal box, I estimated the distance (two blocks) and imagined the walk, counting off each hypothetical step. I should have asked our neighbor’s cats, who occasionally wandered into the house.

My mother tells me outdoor cats are decimating bird populations. “They kill dozens of birds until they are killed themselves.”

Meanwhile an article in the *Atlantic* argues that children raised by overprotective affluent parents grow up to be less creative and more fearful than less restricted working-class

children and children of previous generations in general. Of course I am nostalgic for my childhood spent reading novels between the safe walls of a bourgeois house, my world populated with characters from literature and imaginary friends named Timothy and Li'l Sis. But I remember seeing children walking home from school in what my mother called a "bad neighborhood," glimpsed through a car window. I envied what I took for freedom of mobility.

When Emily Dickinson was eighteen, her father gave her a Newfoundland. She named him Carlo after a dog in *Jane Eyre*. Neighbors remembered Dickinson coming to call with her enormous dog. After Carlo's death in 1866, the poet slipped into reclusiveness.

After my paternal grandmother died and my maternal grandparents were killed in a car accident, and before I stopped going to school, my parents gave me a ninety-pound rescue dog named Myrna. She was a dignified Akita with a fierce bark, a kind protector but not an emotive one. We walked around the neighborhood (palm trees and traffic and manicured lawns), she with her curling tail and I with my patchwork skirts and mirrored scarves. Myrna twice killed cats who ventured into the yard.

There are three tags on Neruda's collar—one with his name and contact information, one documenting a rabies vaccine, and one shiny medallion that says "LAZY, AGILE/ AND STRANGE," from "Ode to the Cat," a tribute to his namesake. When I read Pablo Neruda's memoirs, I was disappointed by his misogyny (he admits that in his early twenties, he raped his maid), as I was also disappointed by the racism in *Spain in the Heart*: "the infernal mulatto goes, the Mola mule." Would I still have named my cat Neruda if I had known then that hovering between "infernal mulatto" and "lady poet," I was not the intended reader for those odes I had once held onto by the scruff of the neck?

The vet tells me that although over-grooming is psychological, he does not think Neruda is unhappy. Then he recommends anti-depressants. I don't tell him the cure is worse than the ailment but buy overpriced pheromone emitters instead.

One of my students works in a psychiatric ward, and whenever he talks or writes about it, I am on the verge of coming out as a "survivor" (such an ambiguous, ideological term). I don't. We are not, after all, a protected class. Another student brings a poem about O.C.D. to discuss. It is a spoken word poem, so he plays the author's performance on his laptop. He says he loves the "emotion" in the poet's voice. The performance bothers me more than the poem. "I have O.C.D., and it is not this melodramatic!" I remark. After my disclosure, no one speaks.

When I was fourteen, I couldn't sleep. Every time I lay down, I had to get out of bed to recheck the locks. One advantage of a two-room apartment is reduced distance between the bed and the door.

Of my thesis manuscript, my committee chair asks, "How might the manuscript itself indicate compulsion? There are 18 mentions of cats. How does the manuscript itself worry? There are 3 uses of 'worry' singular and 2 'worried.'"

Let's call her Professor 1. Professor 2 thinks my manuscript is unfocused and has me write book jacket copy as an exercise. I write that collectively, the poems "demonstrate the underlying restlessness of a subjectivity never quite at ease, like the solitary cats who frequently meander across these pages and disappear only to turn up where they are least expected."

Once a friend told me that my cat and I were both "curmudgeonly," or was it "crotchety"? Neruda and I can't help making our sentiments known and don't know how to behave in company. "I want to be old ladies with you," this particular friend told me before we fell out of touch, and I imagined the two of us sitting in rocking chairs with cats basking on our laps, though I had not yet seen the porches of Pittsburgh.

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<http://www.twelfthhousejournal.com/lauren-russell.html>*

The Art of Speaking

A general may be at fault in five different ways:

- (1) If reckless, he is easily killed.
- (2) If afraid of dying, he is easily captured.
- (3) If quick tempered, he is easily provoked.
- (4) If too sensitive about his honor, he is easily insulted.
- (5) If overly concerned about his men, he is easily harassed.

A conversationalist may be at fault in seven different ways:

- (1) If reticent, she is easily dismissed as boring or self-important.
- (2) If garrulous, she is easily thought overbearing, flirtatious, drunk, or egotistical.
- (3) If opinionated, she will easily alienate half the party.
- (4) If too quick to agree, she may easily be perceived as insubstantial or obsequious.
- (5) If she punctuates her speech with gesticulation, she may easily cause serious injury to person or property.
- (6) If she keeps her arms at her sides, she may easily appear stiff, like a toy soldier or Lego® person.
- (7) If she folds her arms across her chest, she will easily be thought apprehensive and unapproachable.

Perhaps she does not want to be approached.

Perhaps she does not want to be a conversationalist.

Perhaps she would prefer to be a house spider,
claymation waterfall, or ancient Chinese military strategist.

In warfare there are generally nine types of positions, as follows:

- (1) Dissentious
- (2) Facile
- (3) Critical
- (4) Open
- (5) Commanding
- (6) Serious
- (7) Fearful
- (8) Beleaguered
- (9) Desperate.

In conversation, there are only seven:

- (1) Taciturn
- (2) Indecisive
- (3) Critical
- (4) Simpering
- (5) Incoherent
- (6) Apprehensive
- (7) Inattentive (alternately bored, distracted, tired, or drugged).

Weigh all possibilities before making a move.
Acquire the art of being devious before hoping to win.

Fighting with fire may take five forms:

- (1) Burning men
- (2) Burning stores
- (3) Burning baggage trains
- (4) Burning arsenals
- (5) Destroying supply routes.

or

- (1) Slander
- (2) Baiting
- (3) Hate speech
- (4) Sharp and carefully aimed sarcasm
- (5) Exposure (at a gathering, on a social networking site, or on a bathroom stall partition).

To use any of the five forms of incendiarism to best advantage,
do not advance against the direction of the wind.

Those who attack with fire must have perspicacity,
while those who attack with water must have strength.

The wallflower sitting alone at the bar is secretly consolidating her forces.

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Hair

Her huffy histrionics take no heckling, that
uppity puffed-up pastiche mishmash.
The hellion half-breed's
hussyfooted a harvest, a windfall
ensnarled in her miscegenated sassy nappery.

Kink cringes at crumpling brush.
Friar, fire up that fryer! Boinging
sexcapades sink disheveled, so fortune's
whorled the witching wheel for cover.

Weird women's wires cork
a screw, spin a spell to squiggle through.
Bubbling over braided babble, trouble
frizzes furies. Frenzies scramble.

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<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/09/poetry/russell>

Fear of Driving

On the roof of my phobia I meet a woman waiting for the bus. She worries she'll be late for her O.C.D. support group and asks me, several times, if she has dropped her blue purse. She tells me I am a nurturer. I say, "Yes, I coddle my fears."

Fear of harming others is a symptom of O.C.D. But you who think yourselves "normal" are the crazies here. Cars are weapons of mass destruction. When will we mobilize our counterterrorism funds against them?

I curse the drivers who pin me in with U-turns and sexual innuendos and the one who knocked me down and sped away while I lay prostrate on the ground. I loathe busy intersections without walk signs, transportation budget cuts, how I was born in a country where each morning the sun god drives his beamer across the sky.

Someone ran a red light and killed my grandparents at an intersection. A high school classmate died when her boyfriend fell asleep at the wheel. Another killed four when he drove his Saab into an unarmed crowd, screaming "I am the angel of death!" (He successfully pleaded insanity, his parents having hired a first-rate attorney—valet parking only.)

I dream I am driving and I don't know how to stop, don't know how to turn, keep bracing myself for a crash, and wake with my pulse in car-chase mode.

In the cellar there's a hole in the drywall with a brake pedal sticking through. Or is it an accelerator? When I push, the superstructure moves.

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http://www.packingtownreview.com/issues/5/toc.html#U_KtnRakLwm

What Are the Instructor's Major Weaknesses?

Sometimes she is not personable. Sometimes she is impersonating a paragraph with too many gerunds and archly implied quotation marks. It mirrors a little-known architectural style from the late Victorian era that has no place in a classroom this dark. She laughs incongruously after she says anything. She laughs even when her tone is tart. The laugh bumbles into the silence of the question she's left hanging so long that even the botanically accurate ceiling beams are suffocating. You can see them warping every time she talks.

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Dream-Clung, Gone

Undertow of dive bar juke unboxed
Driving past a rust-red door unjambled
Coin-operated groove side-shimmies, unflung
A seamlessly upholstered stool's unwound

Once I fell in love with an Absence. It outgrew the apartment and wouldn't take off its clothes. After we moved it turned taut and slinky, hid in shadows or slid provocatively beneath my coat. Three winters now and the Absence is restless. It's blown across the river, arrives late when it meets me for beer. The Absence is singing:

This is the song of a dawned dance
This is the dance of a dusk-drawn song
This is the fall of a moaned trance
This is the clang of a dream-clung gong

*previously published in Boog City, #56, April 2009; and in the chapbook Dream-Clung, Gone, from Brooklyn Arts Press, 2012; and as part of Eat Local Read Local, 2015:
<http://eatlocalreadlocal.org/about-eat-local-read-local/featured-poets/>*

Hunt for the Unicorn

The tapestries began to breathe, expanding, contracting, shifting. It was as if, when the conservators removed the backing, the tapestries had woken up.

The creature
appears at night,
on the sidewalk outside
the house—a cat,
luminously white
with red sockets
behind pink eyes,
elephantine ears,
asphyxiatingly
triangulated head.

It might have stepped out of
The Unicorn Tapestries,
magical creature or medieval
European's exotic fantasy.

cat o' nine—
tail flicks and flails

In South Carolina a fourteen-year-old black
boy named George, all of 95 pounds in 1944
executed
for the murder of two white girls
on an alleged confession and no other evidence

Evidence from the Inquisition trial
of María González, 1511-1513:

Their reverences ordered a jar of water poured into her
nose and mouth, which was started, and she said she
affirmed everything she had said. ... The order was
given to pour another jar of water. She said, "I speak
the truth, I have spoken the truth, I have already
spoken the truth, I speak the truth, what I have said is
true, I am telling the truth, I do not tell any lies, I have
not lied, I have spoken the truth, I have spoken the
truth." The jar of water was finished. ... Their
reverences ordered the water continued, and the cloth
placed [over her face]. She said

The unicorn, chased
by hunters and hounds,
is finally impaled
by somebody's spear,
a dog at his back; his
head and neck retract.

A sister of one of the girls:
*Everybody knew that he done it—
even before the trial they knew he done it.
But, I don't think they had too much
of a trial.*

Relaxed in person as judaizers:

Marina de Mercado, the woman called “The Patch-Faced,” wife of García de Paraja, daughter of Ynés Nuñez de Naxera, resident of Granada. Judaizer who denied the charges, convicted by her witnesses, burned in person. She was a dogmatizer.

María Nuñez, wife of Hernando Gómez, weaver of silks, resident of Granada. Judaizer who denied the charges, convicted, burned in person. ...

Beatriz Nuñez, widow of Pedro Alvarez, Portuguese, resident of Granada. Relapsed judaizer, burned in person. She was penanced the first time in Lisbon. ...

Lady Ynés Alvarez, wife of Tomás Martínez, constable, judaizer. She went to the *auto* with a paper coronet that signified burning, because she denied the charges. Then she confessed on the scaffolding, and they returned her to the Holy Office without the coronet. She is the sister of Alonso Sánchez's wife; the Inquisition burned her mother.

The unicorn lives
in placid captivity
in a final tapestry.
Perhaps the afterlife
involves lobotomy,
or maybe he just
got tired of running.

*Some of those in the posse describe
the white men as “talking about a rope
party” after the boy was taken into custody.*

Expenses for burning four heretics, 1323:

For large wood.....55 sols, 6 deniers.
For vine-branches.....21 sols, 3 deniers.
For straw.....2 sols, 6 deniers.
For four stakes.....10 sols, 9 deniers.
For ropes to tie the convicts.....4 sols, 7 deniers.
For the executioner, each 20 sols.....80 sols.
In all..... 8 livres, 14 sols, 7 deniers.

*The threads
twisted
and rotated
restlessly.*

The cat or spirit shudders at my step, on its haunches
tremulously hunkering.

*previously published as a Boog Reader by Boog Literature, 2013:
<http://boogcity.com/boogreaders/br10.pdf>; and in Lemon Hound, September 2013:
<http://lemonbound.com/2013/09/27/lauren-russell-bunt-for-the-unicorn-2/>*

Begotten, Not Made

I do not believe in astrology, despite my appearance. I'm always a hippy for Halloween, to avoid hassle and expense. But this year an old friend laughed and said, "You can't be what you already are!" I am no hippy, as I don't like weed. Yet I believe in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, in Judas's bell bottoms, in the dreadlocks of Simon Zealotes. I believe in Andrew Lloyd Webber, but I do not believe in the spiritual properties of crystals or that poetry in America can avoid being capitalist. I do not believe in "true love," but I believe in cats, flannel nightgowns, and temporary relief from throat coat tea, in banjo music, *Roget's Thesaurus*, and the semi-permanence of ink. I believe that solitude has many windows, and I rely on the breeze. Cross-ventilation has its perks, like cross pollination. I almost bought a HYBIRD VIGOR tee-shirt but worried it might smack of multi-ethnic alpha race neo-eugenical belief. I'm not sure I believe in natural selection, I who would be unselected (the third in my line born with a misplaced artery, alive due to class, health insurance, and surgery)—myopia, allergies, tendencies perceived as "insanity." I do not believe in the survival of my species. I believe in science but not in scientists, talking too loudly in the limo behind the hearse. Someone said that empiricism is imperialist, but what is Christianity, then? I don't believe in Virgin Birth or Resurrection or the Nicene Creed, but I say it anyway, with nostalgia for belief. Sometimes I almost believe in ghosts—that night of the fever, bareheaded in the rain, dizzying home, while across a continent, he went cold.

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<http://bettermagazine.org/005/lauren russell.html>

Woman in Red

besotted flush to vamp about
pied piping too toned to blush

flaunts a small dog, crows a cow mad
last to faint, can't recant

voluminous kilt and knick for kicks
swiveling coast collisionscope

hat's hip to hair travails
rigged to goad and twist a trope—

flicks a fat, valorous badge that says
too hot to sizzle, too fast to tread

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NOTES:

“Pittsburgh” references Hanna Rosin’s article “Hey! Parents, Leave Those Kids Alone,” which appeared in *The Atlantic*, April 2014. I learned about Emily Dickinson’s dog, Carlo, while touring her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, now part of the Emily Dickinson Museum. More information on Carlo is available at <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/carlo>.

“The Art of Speaking” incorporates text from the ancient Chinese military treatise *The Art of War*, which is usually attributed to Sun Tzu, though the translation I have claims, “The origins and authorship of China’s oldest military classic, *The Art of War*, remain unknown, but it is generally believed that the book in its present form is a composite of several military treatises which existed during the period of the Warring States (476-221 B.C.).” The translation, by A. and B. Chen, was published by Graham Brash (Pte) Ltd, Singapore. I have Americanized spellings and condensed some material.

In “Hunt for the Unicorn,” quoted material is taken verbatim from the sources except where textual conventions indicate otherwise. The quotations about the trial of George Stinney are from a radio segment called “George Stinney, Youngest Executed” that aired on National Public Radio’s *Day to Day* on June 30, 2004, and from a newspaper article, “Governor Johnston Says Race Would Lynch Youth,” published in the *Atlanta Daily World* on June 23rd, 1944. The Inquisition material is from documents included in *The Spanish Inquisition 1478-1614: An Anthology of Sources*, translated and edited by Lu Ann Homza, and a document quoted in “Torturer’s Apprentice,” an article by Cullen Murphy that appeared in *The Atlantic*, January-February 2012. The quotations about the Unicorn Tapestries appeared in “Capturing the Unicorn,” an article by Richard Preston published in *The New Yorker* on April 11, 2005. Stinney was finally cleared in 2014, seventy years after his execution.

The phrase “begotten, not made” is from the Nicene Creed, which was adapted (in its earliest form) at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The full sentence is “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, / the only Son of God, / eternally begotten of the Father, / God from God, Light from Light, / true God from true God, / begotten, not made, / of one Being with the Father.”