



## ***Sculpture of Meaning: Karla Kelsey's Language Arts***

*Karla Kelsey's well-polished poetic objects remind one of sculpture, of solid materials worked and reworked until they acquire, by the sculptor's hands, freedom of movement in the face of restraint, bounded energy, artful repose.*

*daily begun from.  
The blue paper crane  
hangs in the tree,  
arc of thrust and drag. You  
left plumed. You  
arrived telling of golden sands  
and a golden sea, sidereal navigation  
bringing the bird home  
over bright blooms  
of fire, explosion*

*Her poems are literally shaped by punctuation. Stanzas are broken by asterisks; a cacophony of backslashes populates a single line; images reach toward other images from the far edge of a page. In this way Kelsey bestows on her readers one of poetry's greatest gifts: the space for contemplation.*

*Gone to the window, light there wood-glossy and in non-repose*

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*As in pick up the seeds and throw them into the street*

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*As in 1 color, gone gold and so seeing, all blurred around the edges and walking*

*A reader's journey through her first book, "Knowledge, Forms, the Aviary," is like a twilight walk through a walled garden rich with juxtaposition; everyday objects keep company with blooming botanicals, birds alight on the branches of trees. Inspired by Plato's image of the mind at work, an aviary populated by diverse and divergent species of birds, his symbols of knowledge, Kelsey invites her readers to examine contemporary experience through the optics of the past. An eighteenth-century gardener's dictionary becomes a touchstone for descriptions of flora; an epic Romantic poem teaches the value of scientific language. These elements and others work together to make poetry that is smooth, seamless, whose beautiful moments are path through today's crashing babel.*

*Patterns on the siding,  
amber waves of  
decibels to perform the particles*

*a waking as if we slept,  
here, the street going on before*

*as the street  
goes on*

*in moments*

*of reverberation*

Now, in her new work, "Iteration Nets," a contemporary take on the sonnet form, forthcoming from Ahsahta Press, Kelsey curates an exhibit of sound sculptures, their strict, formal framework a structure for musical language buttressed by rhyme scheme and rhythm. The first section, comprised strictly of sonnets, is "exploded out" in the second into related prose poems that are, in the third, erased to lyrical fragments. In this way Karla Kelsey illustrates the transitory nature of meaning, reminding us that understanding is mutable, and art full of possibility. — Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

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Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.



Karla Kelsey: [Reads "I Was Working the Free Radicals"]

Carlin M. Wragg: I wanted to start with this poem because we have the image of the bird, which you mentioned as being a really important figure throughout the volume, as well as the idea of parts and component parts — I was curious about that. It's hard to give language to this question because I find, for me, reading your work is more of a sensory experience. I find that when I back away and try to understand "what it means" it's reductive, so let me just say some of the things I was thinking about as you were reading: Again, component parts, red and orange-red, that one can be part of another, this taking apart and putting back together again. I'm wondering what you were thinking about as you were composing this, who you were reading, what came into this particular piece?

KK: I think I'm very infatuated with perception, where language and perception meet, and how language creates our perceptions while perception creates our language. So, thinking about the way that we intake the world — that we take in only parts of it, that we can't intake the entire world — is always fascinating to me, as well as the question of what is elemental to experience, or to perception.

I love the problem of color because it's so fraught with questions: Where does color actually exist? Is it in the object? Is it in the mind? These questions are especially rich in philosophy which, now with science they know the accurate version of color, but in the past there were these kinds of flawed philosophies about where color exists that I think are really fascinating. That red is more elemental

than orange-red, or orange, is also a really interesting concept.

KK: The bird imagery in this book comes out of reading JANE LEAD, who's an early modern mystic philosopher. She has this great moment in her book called *A FOUNTAIN OF GARDENS* where there's a bird's heart that she's taken out of the bird and it's pulsing in her hand. I just loved that image, so that plays into the end of the poem. I also like this poem for the book because I think it works in a kind of metapoetic way with the idea of allowing a "her" or a character into the abstraction "arrests it for a moment." I've always been really interested the way that bringing a pronoun or a character into a poem

creates an "aboutness," whereas if you take that out of the poem it becomes more about what's happening between the character in the poem and the

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language, or between the character and where it's going, or the "I" and where it's going, so if you bring a "her" in it becomes about the "her," and if you let the "her" go, it becomes about the landscape in the background, or the way the language forms the "her." So I think that this poem for me was important in articulating how I was trying to use some of the abstract kinds of language and imagery in the book.

CMW: Do you think it's emblematic of the journey you were taking? Is this a later poem or is this an earlier poem?

KK: I think that it's maybe a middle poem. I wrote a lot of these prose poems in one summer and I think that it was an important poem to write. You know when you write something and you feel like you understand what you're writing through the writing of a particular poem? This is one where that certainly happened, where what the project was doing started making sense. I think in editing the book and putting it together things either came into the book or fell out of the book according to this poem. There are a few other poems which I feel were "loadstones" that were important. So the book would have gone in a different direction had I not written this.

CMW: Poetry is so interesting. Again, it's like the parts in this poem, for example. In putting a book together you have the whole track of things, and you have how each part contributes to the whole. But it doesn't come out born as is, it's definitely a process, so it's really interesting to think about the book turning in a different direction depending on what comes next in the writing. Maybe you can point me to other, or another, poem that was like that for you, that you felt was one of those "loadstone" poems?

KK: Well, it's a long sequence in the first part of the book, "Aperture Four," the section's called "Flood/Fold," and it spans from page three all the way to page forty-nine — "Aperture Four" goes from page thirty to forty-nine. In this section I rework a lot of the same lines in different ways.

There's an archetype poem that gets reworked to incorporate found text from a 1731 edition of **A GARDENER'S DICTIONARY**. So I spliced together language from that with my language, then I rework it with some bird imagery, then I rework it with some loose sound translations of the lines. That physical reworking of the language so the language is going through variation was a really important find for me — for this book — because, going back to the parts and the whole, the bird reworks throughout the whole work, and the colors rework, then this is the physical lines of poetry being reworked and spliced with different ideas, so they transform in an almost material way.

CMW: In "Aperture Four," this section you've just described, there are lots of asterisks. They create space on the page and therefore a certain kind of silence between different moments. I kept thinking about the fragments from Sappho when I was reading, of those fragmented texts, and the idea that we don't have access to everything, so it's interesting to hear that you brought in some found pieces. Can you talk about why you made the choice to do that?

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KK: I think I really liked the texture of the older language. I also liked the idea of reading my current perceptions through something like a 1731 gardener's dictionary. At the time I wrote this I lived in Denver and I'd go to the **DENVER BOTANIC GARDENS** all of the time — they have beautiful parks there. There was a great library in the botanical gardens where I read this dictionary. I jotted down some of the passages because I thought it was just so beautiful, the way the plants were described. It was a different way of describing the world than I would usually do it. My perception of the botanical garden shifted because of that, which I thought was an interesting shift, and I found that the language I was using in my own writing was really no longer my own, it was also partly this strange dictionary's, so I brought the language in that way. The way that it works on the page is also very visual. Having the two languages crash together in the center as a kind of rupture I liked visually, working with the asterisks to try to bring the end of this section into a large culmination.

CMW: A couple of things occur to me as you're talking. One of them is the importance of botanicals in your writing. The bird is definitely a figure, but flowers and the different parts of flowers also seem important. Was this because of that text and the experience of being in the gardens?

KK: Yes, that, and at the time I was reading a Romantic poet, **CHARLOTTE SMITH**. She has this great long poem called "**BEACHY HEAD**," and it's just incredible because the poem itself starts out with her on this bluff looking down — I don't know how long the poem is, it's almost book-length — but then she's got these great footnotes, and the footnotes are very precise and scientific, so she'll mention a kind of flower in her poem and then the footnote will either use source text talking about what the flower is, or she will talk about it.

Some of the footnotes are kind of fanciful and some of them are very scientific. I loved that blend in her work between the **ROMANTIC TRADITION**, lots of exclaiming and characters and things like that, and then the scientific footnotes at the bottom. So around the time I was working on this book and looking at gardeners' dictionaries I was also looking at her poetry and reading what she had done.

CMW: When you're reading a work like that, where the footnotes are really contributing to the meaning that's made, do you read a section and then read the footnotes — how do you break that up? What is that experience of reading?

KK: That was a really interesting thing. I met the text through a class on Romanticism that I took with an amazing professor,

**JEFFREY C. ROBINSON**, who took me up to the library at CU Boulder where they have one of the original printings of the book. I was really surprised to see that the footnotes were on the same page as the text because in my anthology it was that way, rather than being end notes, so a lot of times the footnotes would push the lineated language up so there would only be ten lines of verse on a page, the rest would be footnotes,

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which seems crazy to me for a Romantic text. You really do work differently with it, at least I do, moving back and forth between the poetry and the notes.

CMW: It sounds almost like we read today. It sounds like when you're online, for example, and you're doing this hyper-mediated exploration. We always talk about that — well maybe not always, but often — talk about that as a brand new thing, that we haven't done it before, but hearing you describe this reading experience makes it seem like no, in fact.

KK: Yes. His course was so brilliant because it was based around thinking through the imagination versus the fancy, the imagination being something that takes the world and transforms it into something new, whereas the fancy — a poet like Charlotte Smith is alighting on different moments, not necessarily transforming them into a whole new object, but weaving and interweaving through them. To me that does seem like a kind of **HYPERTEXT** experience, or even some poetics of today, **SUSAN HOWE** and Lyn **HEJINIAN**, for example, where reading is less of a linear movement through the text. That was really an illuminating class in terms of how to think about things across traditions. I think that without having done that kind of study this book wouldn't have come out the way that it did.

CMW: It's interesting to hear that experiences one has that aren't in the writing can really be crucial to the writing. I think sometimes it seems as if you should just be writing, but it sounds like one needs to be learning as well, and asking hard questions.

KK: Yes. I think that a lot of times in my writing I keep those experiences out of it. It would be a different kind of poetics if I let them in and put those on the page along with the more aestheticized object. I think it depends on the project, but with this it was very important to me to create a more wrought thing. It's hard for me to even articulate why, but those types of experiences just didn't seem like they were part of what the poem became on the page.

CMW: When you say "wrought thing" — I have definitely felt, when I've been reading your work, like I can't see the seams, which I think is really wonderful, it just seems to be, but I wonder if you've been criticized for that in any way, or if that's been a challenge to you.

KK: I don't know if I've been criticized, but I remember being in workshop at Iowa and people saying, basically, "Why don't you put more on the page? Less wrought, more raw." I really admire writers that have those rough seams and bring in the rough. I think I've tried that a little bit with my second book, *Iteration Nets*. It has a long prose poem section — I feel like everything but the kitchen sink goes into those. But for this project I think it was important for each poem to be a kind of polished object. I don't think that's something that poetry must necessarily do, I think it depends project to project.

CMW: It sounds like you're able to explore those differences, depending on what you're working with at a certain time.

Maybe we can move to another piece, "The Cool of Event and the Hovering of Us." It's the last poem in the book but I thought it would be nice to read it a little earlier on.



KK: [Reads "The Cool of Event and the Hovering of Us"]

CMW: Why is this the last poem in the book?

KK: I think partly because of the ending. It's ending in evening, on a porch — at least for me, yes the porch is in there, sometimes I don't know what gets in there and what doesn't — in the evening on a porch, the moths are flooding, the wings are flooding, the day's left to shadow down, so it feels very much like a finishing poem; it's the end of the day, the end of the imagery. This was another important poem to the book. When I wrote it I knew that it was one of those "loadstone" poems, it definitely felt like a finishing, and I think that the book can be read through it, even though it's last.

CMW: There are some amazing, striking images, or moments, in this poem, and one of them that I always come back to is this cracked leather glove and the juxtaposition of that leather, which was skin, with "blood beating at the neck." Where did that image come to you from? Is it something you'd seen? Was it imagined?

KK: Partly imagined, and partly it comes from, there's a **DAVID ST. JOHN** poem, "**MAN WITH THE YELLOW GLOVES**," he was my first teacher, and that poem, where the gloves are also the skin, has always really stayed with me. I think that poem is "the cracked leather glove held to the nose" in some ways.

I also love the idea of the smell of the leather, and the way it feels, and that it's old yet still has essence, so I think it comes from the poem, but also from the physical sensation.

CMW: As you were writing this were you thinking about what you mentioned earlier, the "she" coming into the poem and that being a really important thing, about how we react when there's a "she," as opposed to just *something*?

*"...the flood of experience is so vibrant, and what we hold on to from that, our memories, the things we make or the things that we attach to, those things are rocks in the stream of experience..."*

KK: Yes. I think this is a finishing poem because there are all of these artifacts in it. There's the house, there's the beautiful books, the Bible project, the glove; those kinds of objects are also like characters, in a way, not just in a book, but in our experiences. You know, the flood of experience is so vibrant, what we hold on to from that, our memories, and the things we make or the things that we attach to, those things are rocks in the stream of experience, in a way, so I think that the poem being littered with objects makes those kinds of "hers" or "shes" come into the poem, and into the book.

CMW: I love what you just said about objects being characters. How do you think about that? Do you continue to think about that as you're working on new projects?

KK: Definitely. I think that objects, they always seem very luminous to me and just so wonderful with symbolic power. They are both personal and collective. Something like a glove, particularly since we don't really use gloves anymore, has this particular texture to it that, I think, transfers from reader to reader, like I imagine the birds of knowledge working: they're different for each person, but collectively we understand what the thing is, and once it populates a poem, it's there to attach to in work that's not necessarily narrative. Those things, I think, are very important. They give it cohesion and make it transferable from person to person.

CMW: This is reminding me of an essay you sent me about beauty. There are some really interesting thoughts in that particular essay, but one of the things I'm thinking about as you're talking is how a rose — it's an idea, it's a word, there're a lot of things you explore in this essay — how it can be many different things. There's a moment, if I'm remembering correctly, where you talk about poetry for the sake of language and meaning, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that, about the responsibility of the poem, or the poet, to make meaning, or what meaning might be in a poem. Is it really this literal, "this is happening, we're moving from point A to point B" thing, or can it be something else?

KK: I think meaning in poetry can be so many different things. I think that because poetry is so based in sound and the visual experience, both in the poetic image and the way poems work on the page, that it really expands into meaning that you would think of when you're considering how a concerto has meaning, or an abstract or even figurative work of visual art has meaning; that it's working on those levels as well as a kind of semantic, dictionary type of meaning.

You know, I don't tend to think in terms of "all poems," but I think that for this book, flexibility

was very important. We were talking about the poem as polished object; I think that was important to me with this book because I want to give the reader these polished things in which to work, and with which to work. If I loaded them with my own experience, the places where the poems came for me, then the reader would engage with it more on that level, with what the poems mean for this author, this particular persona creating them, whereas giving readers polished moments of language, or experience, or perception, or a small image of the mind at work, means the reader navigates it on his or her own in the great tradition of openness in poetry that writers like Lyn Hejinian and

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**GERTRUDE STEIN** were so great at talking about and working with. There really are so many interesting ethics of poetic language. I like thinking around those thoughts but I don't like to prescribe because I find so many different traditions of poetry so rich.

CMW: So it is something that you're thinking about when you are writing — this conversation between the reader and the writer, it sounds like that's something you want to open up. When you're writing something, what do you hope that a reader will bring to the table as they're going through the work?

KK: With this book the hope is for an openness to language and imagery. I hope that some of it is intriguing enough for the reader to carry around and think through. I think the image is so important to me for that reason, that if I can make imagery that's good enough a reader will work with that in his or her own mind. I'd like people to think about how language works, that something can affect you without necessarily having a narrative thread or a wrought philosophy or ethics

to it, that it can have power and act on you even in the absence of those things.

CMW: When you go out, away from literature, what kind of art are you looking at that brings something back to the page?

KK: Well, I have favorite artists. **KIKI SMITH** is definitely a favorite visual artist. I love her sculpture, and I love the way that her work can mean so many different things, depending on the viewer. I just saw the **LOUISE BOURGEOIS** show, that was great. She uses so many of the same figures, but through different materials they acquire a completely different texture and gravity. I like that reworking with things that would otherwise become static.

CMW: Can we move on to some of the work you're doing now? Maybe you could describe the project a little bit because it seems like it has a pretty strong intellectual underpinning.

KK: Yes, it's very formal. It's called *Iteration Nets* and it's based on the **SONNET** form. It's in three parts. In the first section all the poems look like sonnets and use sonnet rhyme schemes, but they use lines from

outside texts, and really, really lose homophonic translations of those lines which become the rhymed lines. Then, for second section, I took those poems and

exploded them out into long prose poems. In the third section the prose poems are erased into little lyric fragments.

The form came through reading sonnets and thinking about sonnets. Again, there was a class I was taking at the University of Denver where we were doing something on sonnets and it seemed like a really rich tradition, one I hadn't explored in

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years, so it started with that. Then **PETER [YUMI]**, my husband, was working a lot with sound, he was doing a lot of electronic music and sampling, and the way he sampled lines and tweaked them and remixed them really resonated with how I was working with the sonnets; taking found lines and doing loose sound translations of them.

At the same time, I was also moving across the country, from Denver to Pennsylvania, so having a really formal project helped a lot because I knew, if not the content, what the form of the poems would be.

In terms of theory, I was thinking about **INTERTEXTUALITY** a lot, and that becomes really ripe when you're taking — I might have had a line of Shakespeare in one of my original sonnets — then I'm taking that line and expanding it into a prose poem, and when you do that, when you take Shakespeare's word "the" and then it ends up being in your own sentence about the highway while you're traveling, whose "the" does it become? It was a very physical process, a physical way of understanding certain ideas about text and intertextuality.

It's the kind of thing — because the prose poems in the second section get repeated in the third but most of it is whited out — it's kind of inevitable and irrecoverable, in a way. Looking back and reading from them is hard sometimes because they really can't be changed without changing the entire thing. That's an interesting thing for me; usually little parts can be changed, sections can be changed, but these poems are fixed in stone, in a way.

CMW: How interesting that you're working with deconstructing a formal poetic structure but your finished piece seems like it can't be changed, that your own work is fixed. It's a wonderful kind of juxtaposition.

KK: Yes, it's something I like thinking about, free will and fate. I don't know, I think I'm a little scared to tease out what this indicates about those things.

CMW: Maybe you could read from the series you shared with me. Could you start with the sonnet and then read the third section where the prose has been erased?



KK: [Reads "18.1" and "18.3" from Iteration Nets. Also featured is the text of "18.2"]

CMW: Maybe you can talk a little bit about why you wanted to do the section with erasure?

KK: Sure. There are a few reasons. The middle of the book becomes really dense and heavy — not necessarily intellectually heavy, although I like to flatter myself that it does, but very dense with language — so I liked the idea of opening the book at the end and freeing moments out of it. I also liked the idea that many poems could be made out of the prose poems; that my ending poem is just one version of it. I'd like to think that invites other readers to make other poems out

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I also really love **RONALD JOHNSON'S "RADI OS,"** where he erases **PARADISE LOST**, and some of the erasure projects that have been going on in recent times. I like the idea of texts being latent in other texts; that what it is depends on how you look at it and what mood you're in when you're working with the text. I like the idea that even if you read a book in a straightforward way that you're only coming away with fragments. Those kinds of ideas were all funneling through while I was writing.

CMW: In that first section, visually, you have some slash marks and visual ways of breaking the lines within the lines. What is the reason behind adding those?

KK: Well, a lot of the slash marks are because I took a line from poetry, they indicate where the

line breaks originated. Then, when I did a translation of the line, I kept the slash marks in there. The punctuation I reinvented, all of it, so that you can read through the poem and make sense and meaning out of the poem in a very grammatical way.

CMW: Is there any other form that you think you might want to explore in future?

KK: I love the **SESTINA**. I think that that "I like the idea of texts being latent in other texts; that what it is depends on how you look at it and what mood you're in when you're working with the text." would be a great form to work with. I really like **JO ANN WASSERMAN'S** book, **THE ESCAPE**, she works with the sestina so beautifully in that book. I also love the idea some of the **OULIPIANS** have written on — sestinas where you're not just repeating end words and patterns, you're repeating whole sentences and maybe making prose poem sestinas. I think that kind of thing would be really great to work with.

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*Karla Kelsey is author of two full-length books: "Knowledge, Forms, the Aviary" (Ahsahta Press 2006) and "Iteration Nets" (Ahsahta Press, forthcoming).*

*In addition, she has published three chapbook-length books: "Little Dividing Doors in the Mind" (Noemi Press, 2005), "Three Movements" (Pilot Press, 2009) and "Into the eyes of lost storms" (Narwhal Press, 2009).*

*To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Ms. Kelsey, go to [www.openlooppress.org](http://www.openlooppress.org)*