A NIGHT WITH DODIE BELLAMY

ROBERT DEWHURST

Dodie Bellamy became one of the earliest innovators of hallmark New Narrative strategies like metanarration, personal disclosure, collage, and enthusiasm for pop culture shortly after arriving in San Francisco in 1978 and enrolling in Robert Glück's Monday-night workshop at Small Press Traffic. Forming fast friendships with community impresarios Glück, Steve Abbott, and Bruce Boone, Bellamy made quantum leaps for New Narrative practice with her now-classic volumes *Real: The Letters of Mina Harker and Sam D'Allesandro* (Talisman House, 1994), a collaboration with the late Sam D'Allesandro; her masterpiece of epistolary séance, *The Letters of Mina Harker* (Hard Press, 1998); and the polymorphously perverse *Cunt-Ups* (Tender Buttons, 2001). Bellamy brought poststructural, feminist, and working-class concerns to bear on New Narrative poetics, and has embraced intergenre intrepidity, frequently troubling the boundaries between fiction, essay, poetics, sex writing, and cultural critique. Her recent publications include *the buddhist* (Publication Studio, 2011), *Cunt Norton* (Les Figues, 2013), *The TV Sutras* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014), and *When the Sick Rule the World* (Semiotext(e), 2015). With Kevin Killian, she has just coedited the watershed anthology *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing, 1977–1997* (Nightboat Books, 2017).

I wanted to speak with Bellamy from my blurry vantage as a latecomer to the New Narrative party—as a younger reader enchanted and still trying to make sense of the various literary, political, and social currents that

coalesced in the group's early moments. Hoping to hark back to our favorite kind of talky, improvised interviews (like those found in old issues of *Gay Sunshine*, *Interview*, and *Bomb*), it felt important to Dodie and me to speak in person and to present our conversation with a feather-light editorial hand, so as to sidestep what we agreed is the lifelessly prefabricated quality of many literary interviews in the e-mail era. In mid-August 2013, we met at my studio apartment in MacArthur Park, the night after Bellamy's Los Angeles release reading for *Cunt Norton*. We placed a portable voice recorder on my coffee table and began discussing her personal history, wide-ranging oeuvre, and distinct take on New Narrative over bottled seltzer waters and whiskey ginger ales.

Robert Dewhurst: Last night you read a beautiful prose piece about steel, commissioned for an SFMOMA exhibit with Mark di Suvero; you examined the material's brutal social relations of production, which you saw firsthand growing up in the Rustbelt. The piece is written more from your vantage as a former Midwesterner than as a coastal art writer, and somehow this enables your stunning conclusion, "Art writers lie. Art lies." How did being from the Midwest shape you as a writer?

Dodie Bellamy: Other than making me uncool? Well, even though I've hardly written anything that my mother would find comprehensible, I feel this loyalty to where I came from, and also this need to be accessible. That need has been problematic, given the writing environment I was raised in, in San Francisco. Even when it was so uncool to be accessible, and I was still feeling this internalized pressure to have a kind of neon intelligent surface, accessibility was really important to me. I associate that with where I'm from. In the Midwest, I knew working-class people, and even in college most of my friends were working class, because I went to a state school. Later, in San Francisco, I entered a middle-class world. So besides the geographical difference, I think of the two places in terms of class difference. I really don't know what a middle-class Midwestern life would be like.

RD: Where did you live before San Francisco?

DB: I grew up in Hammond, Indiana, and then I majored in comp lit at Indiana University. After college I went to Chicago for a year. I didn't want

to do that, but I was in a long-term relationship and my girlfriend got this job in Joliet, which is south of Chicago—it's where the prison is. My reward for going with her was I got to go to the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology. I was always fascinated with that place, because László Moholy-Nagy founded the photography department. I studied photography there for a semester but what I realized is that I make a really good friend for photographers, not a good photographer. The whole mechanism/machine thing, mediating between me and the world—I just couldn't relate to it. But through it I got a student job working as a photographer's assistant at the corporate office of Montgomery Ward, where I became a graphic artist. The graphic artists at Montgomery Ward basically showed me what they did, and I made a fake portfolio because I had all the equipment at work, and I started to freelance as a graphic artist.

When my girlfriend and I broke up, I moved to San Francisco, because all the gay guys I knew from college had either moved to Chicago or San Francisco. I was just following my friends to San Francisco. I didn't even know about the writing scene—I mean, I knew the Beatniks existed, but that was it. I didn't realize that I was moving to a writing scene that was really intense.

RD: What year did you arrive in San Francisco?

DB: 1978, October. I arrived the month before Jonestown and Harvey Milk—they happened the same month. Kevin [Killian] arrived in '80, a little after I did. It was heaven. There was still all this alternative art and writing stuff going on in North Beach, so I got to see the tail end of North Beach as a literary center. In *The Letters of Mina Harker*, I talk about sitting with Gregory Corso at the Café Trieste. Those old Beats were still roaming around—Corso, Bob Kaufman, and others. It was really exciting to be in such a beautiful place, hanging out at Vesuvio's and City Lights. I was like Jack Spicer: at first I lived in the Polk Street area, just a few blocks from where Spicer lived on California Street, and I hung out in North Beach. Sometimes I walked over the hill, but a lot of times I walked through the Broadway Tunnel, just like he did. Eventually I moved to North Beach. San Francisco was where I started taking writing seriously. For the first time in my life I was living alone, and I was terrified of being alone, and there

was this amazing scene out there, so I went to readings every night, kind of indiscriminately. All I did was do freelance graphics, drink, have sex, and write. That was my whole life, I didn't do anything else. And I was doing it in North Beach, how great was that? I have this one piece about trying to do the laundry and failing. I didn't really do laundry, I just wore dirty clothes—I mean, it wasn't like "doing graphics, drinking, having sex, writing…and doing laundry." I just didn't do anything else. Well, I took walks too.

RD: Had you always wanted to be a writer?

DB: I always wanted to be a writer. But in college I didn't take any writing classes, except for one summer writing course in the mid-1970s. Indiana University had this horrible summer writing program—it still goes on—and they have these visiting writers teaching. I don't know what it's like now, but back then the worst macho, asshole guys came in as students year after year. I ended up in Marge Piercy's poetry workshop. It was supposed to be with Muriel Rukeyser, but she got sick and so Piercy filled in. I had read Piercy's novels. She was one of those big feminist writers so I was really happy and excited to have a class with her at the time. But I was a grade addict—I got all straight As. Marge Piercy gave me a B- for the poetry workshop. I finally take a writing workshop and I get a B-? It was so humiliating. In a summer, week-long workshop, to give someone a B-? But I was so shy. One of the requirements was that you had to present. I somehow managed to hide and I never even presented my work to the class. But I did meet with her one on one.

RD: The vestiges of the Spicer, North Beach scene bring me to another thing I wanted to ask you about, which has to do with your relation to poetry. Your career as a prose writer has happened largely in the context of poetry. *Cunt Norton* plays on this—in the book, you've perverted a series of poems from an old *Norton Anthology of Poetry* into these deranged prose blocks by intermixing them with a preexisting pornographic text, à la Burroughs and your earlier work, *Cunt-Ups*. In the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, you say you're "fucking" the poems. So, how would you describe your relationship to poetry?

DB: I started out as a poet. That's really what I wanted to be. All I wrote was poetry. I really read a lot of poetry, and all the readings I went to were poetry readings, obviously—and I saw amazing people read in those early days, just randomly. But my poems were increasingly becoming these long, narrative things, which was just not something you could do in the early 80s in San Francisco and hold your head up high. So when I started studying with Bob Glück, I was exposed to a more experimental approach to prose. There's lots of experimental approaches to prose, but in Bob and Bruce Boone's vein of it I realized that I could do everything I wanted to do in poetry, but do it in a form in which my narrative urges would also be acceptable. So I switched.

But I was terrified of writing prose, mostly from being a Comp Lit major at Indiana University and having to write papers—which I did okay on, but if I had a month to write a paper it would be three weeks of terror. I remember taking LSD one time and then sitting there going, "Oh my god, I have this paper due, and now I'm too fucked up to write it." Then I spent a week writing the paper and did fine on it. So I started out really simply. "The Debbies I Have Known" and the other one in *Feminine Hijinx*—"Complicity"—were the first two pieces of prose I wrote. *Mina* was actually me learning how to write. The first seventy-five pages of *Mina* got condensed down to the first ten in the book.

Poetry's been very important. But I think that line breaks can be really, really precious. What is the point? Much of the time it's like, *why don't you just write a fucking sentence*? What is the point of breaking it in the middle there? What is it adding? Or it's like, *oh, so clever*. I'm unable to do line breaks without feeling stupid. Also, the prose block has a different rhythm. I like to do claustrophobia in writing. I'm really drawn to density.

I love Claudia Rankine's book *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. If Rankine's paragraphs were all jammed together her book would not work the way it works with the sections separated out like that, so I just wonder—part of me keeps returning to this urge to separate my paragraphs out like that, one to a page, more prose-poemy-like. But I haven't stuck my toe in those waters yet.

The division between poetry and not-poetry is not one that I really believe in. But then, on the other hand, Kevin's poem for that same Mark di Suvero

thing was just amazing. He read it at Janey Smith's 851 reading series in the Haight—the night the place got shut down by the police—and I wished I could do something like Kevin did. What I read last night, my steel piece, was also commissioned to be a poem, and I got really frustrated that I couldn't make it a poem. But for that piece I was so into content, that it seemed stupid to be like, *alright, let's make the content a little harder to get*. That's what a poem would have done. To me, poetry is about content in a way that's less straightforward. I'm very straightforward. Some people can manage writing poetry that's very straightforward about content, but most of it's really bad. When somebody does pull that off, I get really excited, because it seems like a possibility for me.

All my sound comes from Sylvia Plath. She was really, really important. She's a genius. A friend gave me *Ariel* as a birthday present in my early days in San Francisco. I was inspired by her way of writing about the personal in a manner that just goes way beyond. She's a "confessional" writer in the same sense that the New Narrative writers are, I guess, because greater issues are constantly coming into play—Plath's doing a performance of self, rather than vomiting up personal details. I never stop being blown away by her. I loved Anne Sexton, too. Her fairytale transformations I found really interesting. Actually, in some ways Sexton took a lot more risks in her writing—hers has this looser, crazier thing going on.

I'm still very much involved in the poetry world, and that's where a lot of my audience and publishers have been until recently. I was the director of Small Press Traffic for five years. There weren't very many nonpoets that read there. I think it's good and bad to be a writer in a poetry world. It kind of narrows your career.

RD: Let's skip back to Robert Glück's workshop. Can you detail how you entered the New Narrative group?

DB: Well, I was first involved in the Feminist Writers Guild. A woman there told me that I should take a class with Kathleen Fraser at San Francisco State. So because of some friend in the Feminist Writers Guild, I somehow talked my way into Kathleen's graduate poetry workshop—which was really hard to get into, and it wasn't like there was any space, she just let me in, even

though I wasn't a student. I took four classes with Kathleen at State: I took her poetry workshop twice, and then I took Feminist Poetics, and back then they actually offered a women's writing workshop. Kathleen suggested that I take classes with Bob Glück. He was teaching at Small Press Traffic. For a while I was taking workshops simultaneously at SF State with Kathleen and at Small Press Traffic with Bob.

This is in the early 80s. I never actually took a class at Bob's house, when he made that transition. I planned to and then I just never did. But I studied with him at Small Press Traffic for a number of years. That's where I met Kevin. He was doing what, at the time, I considered incomprehensible poetry.

There were three workshops that Bob taught: there was the Monday night workshop, which anybody could be in; then there was the queer one, which I wasn't allowed to do, because you had to be a gay male; and there was a Saturday afternoon workshop for older people, but you didn't have to be old. Everybody from the workshops, the students, did a lot of hanging out. I was constantly hanging out with these people from the workshops in cafés and at readings and parties. It became very much a social-life thing. And I seemed to end up at Bob's house all the time. Sometimes, for a while there, once or twice a week Bob was cooking me dinner impromptu. He did a lot of critiquing of my writing outside of the workshop. I was like this eager puppy, endlessly wanting attention.

Bruce Boone was just around. Lots of people thought Bruce and Bob were a couple, but they weren't. Well, they were a couple in some way—they were spoken of together, "Bruce & Bob" or "Bob & Bruce," kind of like Simon & Garfunkel.

So while I was taking Bob's classes, I also started hanging out with Bruce. He and I had a very intense friendship—a very combustible, emotional friendship. Bruce likes to instruct, so he taught me the things he was interested in. I learned a lot about Bataille and Robin Blaser from him. Bruce had a party once where he played Spicer reading *The Holy Grail*. That was the party—we just sat around and listened to this cassette from a boom box. Bruce at that time was really, really involved in the scene and very vocal. I got involved in New Narrative right after the Left/Write Conference, so there was still that whole Marxist thing in the air. Bruce was very much into

Bataille when I knew him—I witnessed the transition from Bataille to Zen. Steve Abbott was also an important figure on the scene, teaching and socializing. He was our village explainer, as Gertrude Stein said of Pound. He led a series of classes in theory at Small Press Traffic that I've always regretted missing. Steve was editor of *Poetry Flash*, and he knew everybody, so his parties were a great mix—the New Narrative folks, but also surprises like Armistead Maupin and James Broughton, and Issan Dorsey, the founder of the Hartford Street Zendo. I did graphic design on the final issues of Steve's magazine, *Soup*. I also designed the cover for *The Truth about Ted*, and I helped Bob with the cover for *Jack the Modernist*. I was eager to serve. I did the covers for Kevin's first books and for Sam D'Allesandro's book *The Zombie Pit*, and for my own chapbook *The Debbies I Have Known*. Oh, I also did the covers for the magazine *Mirage*, and a zillion flyers for Small Press Traffic. I even produced the logo for *How(ever)*. Kathleen designed it, I just executed it.

As far as my writing goes, I would say I was a student of both Bob and Bruce's. But Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, and Kevin were also people I learned a lot from. I studied Dennis's writing very closely, and then Kathy's—I wasn't influenced by her technique as much as her spirit, and her aggressive female sexuality. She also brought appropriation to New Narrative. As a student of New Narrative, Kathy was held up to me as the queen of writing. I learned to write about sex from Kevin and Dennis. Kevin takes such an outrageous attitude towards it. One of my favorite things about Dennis is that he's so smart and well read, without coming across as pretentious. In his writing, he has this way of being obsessively in control without feeling mannered.

RD: What is your definition of "New Narrative"?

DB: I'll just say what was important to me about it, not an official definition.

What seemed so radical to me at the time was, first, New Narrative's way of acknowledging that the writer was writing the piece. To have the process of writing be part of the piece. That was really important for me, but I don't think of New Narrative as "metafiction"—it has a different tone or heart than what I normally think of as metafiction, which can be so cerebral and cold and tedious.

Second, the permission to write about pop culture in a way that took it seriously and acknowledged its profound ability to move you—that you could do that and analyze it intellectually at the same time, the idea that those two modes weren't an either/or. Bruce's essay "Hollywood Celluloid Nuke Madness," about that Mike Hammer film, *Kiss Me Deadly*, had an especially profound influence on me. But I think this is also a gay approach, in general, to pop culture—the embracing of it and acknowledging its power.

Third, the whole idea of crossing genres, so that essay and fiction and memoir all bleed into the same piece. I'm always trying to teach Creative Nonfiction now, because I think it's closer to New Narrative than fiction is. My own writing project, at least, has very little to do with fiction. I mean, there's fiction in *The TV Sutras* that I'm working on now, but it's not like a novel—it's a memoir that I decided to put some fiction into. It's just that when you branch out from writing about all your friends, you have to start writing fiction.

RD: I'm interested in all this social history—the workshops, parties, relationships. I'm thinking of the way *Feminine Hijinx* plotted female friendship, and how New Narrative's foundational work, *My Walk with Bob*, displayed Bruce Boone's friendship with "Bob" Glück. Why is friendship itself an important subject matter, or narratorial concern, for New Narrative?

DB: Well, there was lots of talk at the time about community, that writing was a communal activity. Things were very much about friendship, in the sense that everybody was hanging out together and reading one another's writing and writing about each other. You really wanted to be in somebody's book. But I think all writing communities are about friendship.

My personal experience was that I began with no self-confidence whatsoever. So, I was myself a communal project. I would never have become a writer without the support of this larger community and group of friends giving me all this attention. I mean, I got serious feedback and critique in those days. But it was a very supportive critique.

While teaching in schools has certainly taught me all the rules of narrative that I never really wanted to know, I would say more than anything it's shown me how lucky I was to be raised in an alternative community, and just

how rigorous my training as a writer was. Being raised outside the academy, if you wanted attention you basically had to produce good work. And if you didn't produce good work, nobody was going to give you support for it. So, in one way it was really supportive, but in another way it was actually kind of heartless—you had to really show up. I think a lot of support is given to people in graduate writing programs today who would not have survived in the Bay Area writing community. It really made you work hard. Writing was just taken so seriously.

The Bay Area writing community, in general, has produced amazing writing. I remember when they had the MLA off-site reading in Chicago in '07, a lot of the readers had lived in the Bay Area at one time or another, and I could not believe the talent of the Bay Area people. They kind of wiped the floor.

RD: Outside the Bay Area, you seem to have had a certain amount of exchange in those years with the Los Angeles literary scene—and still do. Two LA presses, Les Figues and Semiotext(e), are publishing books of yours this year, and you teach here at Antioch University. Were Los Angeles writers a peripheral influence?

DB: Absolutely. Kevin and I had a lot of exchange in the 80s with the LA writing scene. We were also going up to Vancouver, so we had a whole West Coast thing going on. We met Dennis Cooper through Bob and Bruce. At the time Dennis was curating the readings at Beyond Baroque and that really changed the face of Los Angeles writing. He took the series over from a group of established LA writers and started importing people. Before Leland Hickman did the experimental poetry journal *Temblor*, he had another magazine called *Bachy*, which published those original Los Angeles writers. I used to be a great fan of *Bachy*, especially the poems and interviews of Holly Prado. And I was really into Kate Braverman's novel *Lithium for Medea*. Prado was about precise detail, very quiet and private, but Braverman was brassy and excessive, a writing so lush it rots there on the page. You can see why I liked it.

So through knowing Dennis and reading at Beyond Baroque, Kevin and I met the people that Dennis knew. They had a less intellectual surface than the experimental writers in the Bay Area. The San Francisco New Narrative

scene gave me permission to write about sex, but the people in LA gave me permission to get in touch with the primal. We used to come down here and we would stay at Dennis's place. That's how we met Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose. Benjamin Weissman took over the reading series at Beyond Baroque, and at the same time we met the poets Amy Gerstler and Ed Smith.

We also met the artists that Dennis knew—that whole CalArts, UCLA scene. I was amazed by Mike Kelley, but I didn't actually have a conversation with him until two years before he died, though, because he was just too cool for me and I was afraid of him. I finally talked to him at a party after a Raymond Pettibon opening Kevin and I happened to be in town for. It was at the home of Raymond's dealer. She didn't invite us, Raymond just lugged us along. And I found myself talking to Mike Kelley and I'm all nervous, and was telling him how I'd recently been on a panel at the West Hollywood Book Fair with this Balanchine ballerina who'd written a memoir about how she was into bottomy anal sex, and when I said the words "butt fucking," Kelley's face lit up, and we got on famously after that. I loved Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings* book—just the fact that someone would do a book of thrift-store paintings, it's so pathetic and wondrous. Raymond's been a continued inspiration. I love how incendiary and vulgar he is. In San Francisco we talked on and on about abjection, but with these LA people you could really feel it.

There's a relationship to pop culture that they have down here which I responded to, an acceptance of its inevitability—living in LA, no matter how Serious an artist or writer you are, you live and breathe pop culture, there's no escaping it—or at least that's the way it seems to this outsider. There's a keen intelligence here that is really suspicious of pretension. What Los Angeles did for me was give me that permission to turn away from pretension. Also, while there was Language poetry in LA, it had no impact on these people that we were hanging out with—I mean, they knew those people, but they were a different thing, something separate. I cannot say that I was treated badly by the Language poets—I was published in *Poetics Journal*, I would get to participate in their "literary events," and Barrett Watten and Carla Harryman were supportive of my writing. They always invited us to their barbecues. Since Carla and Barrett left town I hardly ever get to go to a barbecue. In San Francisco back then, everybody was trying to write like Language poets—there was this general feeling that you had to

become this faux Language poet in order to keep your head up, and that was unfortunate. A lot of really, really bad work came out of that.

RD: Unpretentiousness seems to be an essential part of your ethos—in *Academonia*, you boast that you could explain Lacan to a child. At the same time, of all the New Narrative writers, you may be the most versed in high theory. How has theory been useful, or not, to you as a writer?

DB: That's funny that you say that, Robbie. I don't think anybody else would consider me "the most versed in high theory." In fact, back in the heyday of New Narrative, my writing was criticized for not being theoretical enough. I did enjoy reading theory books, but I tended to read women. Even in my phase when I was into Jung, for instance, I didn't read Jung—I read feminist Jungians. The same was true with Lacan. I read that Catherine Clement book, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*. She was his student, so she explains his theories in a way that's really accessible. She takes away your fear of him, and then she also talks about the whole circus around him and his rise to fame.

My reading in theory was an extension of my broader feminist project to read women writers. After four years as an undergrad in Comp Lit, I counted the books I'd read by women: I read *To the Lighthouse*, as an independent study; I read Gertrude Stein's portrait of Picasso; and I read one paragraph by Madame de Stael. That is all the women I read in four years in Comparative Literature. Oh, and Mary Ellen Solt, who taught at IU—she edited a big anthology of Concrete Poetry, so I read a couple of concrete poems by women. Therefore, after I graduated I took it upon myself to read books by women. This is in the mid-to-late 70s. So, naturally, when I got to theory, I mostly read theory books by women. I mean, I could never read Deleuze and Guattari! I tried—yuck. They were really big then.

I don't get it. These guys, they were in mental hospitals, they served the Nazi party, they beat their wives, they'd kill their wives, and these women are reading them and quoting them. I *do not* get it. Even now, women who are supposedly writing about feminism and "the body" will introduce their book with a quote by Benjamin. What the fuck? Why? Well, I know why, because they want to be taken seriously. But I hate the fact that there's still this

internal or external pressure to quote certain European male philosophers. I've totally resisted that. I actually took it seriously when Audre Lorde said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."
So, there was lots and lots of theory in *Mina*, but I would always insert it as this foreign language coming in, as an alien thing. And then I would usually subvert it, and change all the verbs to "fuck" or something. I would take, say, Avital Ronell, and do something like that. In the 80s a lot of theorists were talking about how everything was sex—and I took that literally! I made everything sex, literally.

But I really love Catherine Clement, and I think she's less popular just because you can easily understand her. And I love Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*—or her introduction to it, at least. But even in that—why couldn't she write about one woman? It's all men that she writes about in that book. I hate Cixous. But I really liked Irigaray; she was important early on. All those French feminists were important. I also liked to read ordinary academic books that weren't theory books. While I was writing *Mina* I was reading a book about the childhood writings of the Brontës, so that became important in *Mina*, just because I happened to be reading it then. I used to read any feminist book I could get my hands on. I loved Elizabeth Grosz. Lines of hers I've stolen, but she wasn't really parodied, because I really liked her. *Volatile Bodies* is just amazing.

RD: In *The Barf Manifesto*, you wrote that you vowed to quit writing essays after *Academonia*, but couldn't stop yourself. Next fall, your third volume of essays will appear from Semiotext(e). Why has the essay been a persistent form for you?

DB: It goes back to Bruce's vision—an essay that can be made to encompass all forms. That was a really important vision that Bruce had. Some of my essays, to me, really do that.

I recently taught a class called "The Irresponsible Essay." I stole that title from Ramsey Scott. The way I met Ramsey, he asked me to be on a panel he was proposing for the MLA called "The Irresponsible Essay," arguing against the notion of "responsible scholarship." The panel, of course, got rejected. So I thought that rather than teach a class called "The Lyric Essay," I'd use

Ramsey's title. Finally I read Montaigne at that point, because I had to teach this class on the essay. And I found that in its original form the essay was pretty all-encompassing—a meditation on how the writer interacts with the world, how we form knowledge. I like to talk about the world directly, in a way that I can have moments of poetry and look at something from different angles, without a linear viewpoint, in different-sided fragments—with a fictive lens, a more poetic lens, an analytical lens.

RD: In your essays, it seems important that the observing "I" is really you, Dodie, stridently denuding the form of its usual pretense of objectivity: "To deny one's lens," you've written, "is corrupt." On the other hand, it seems equally important that in your collage work the "I" not be taken literally, but at most as only a "phantom" or illusion—a kind of special effect of the cut-up method. How do you understand the relationship between these opposite versions of the first person?

DB: To me the first person is a tone. It's not about content or even the personal. It's about a relationship with the reader, an invitation to intimacy or discomfort. Or maybe instead of *invitation*, *manipulation* is more accurate. For me the first person is much more seductive than the third person. I'm thinking about the difference between Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason series and his lesser known Cool and Lam series. I discovered the Cool and Lam books when I was helping Kevin catalogue the novels found beside Jack Spicer's bed at the time of his death—and I loved *Pass the Gravy* so much I read all twenty-nine books in the series straight through. For go-to-sleep reading. It took a couple of years. When I finished them I was like, *what do I read now?*, so I turned to Perry Mason, and I hated the Perry Mason books. Part of that is Perry's confusing, sexual-harassment-suit type relationship with his secretary Della Street, but most of it, I believe, is because the Perry Mason books are in the third person, while the Cool and Lam books are in the first. Lying in bed reading Donald Lam's first person account of his dames and cases, it's like having this weirdo detective whisper in my ear, with this almost subliminal vulnerability in his voice. I didn't care about the trashy, clunky writing, I developed a huge crush on Donald. I think in general, the first person flirts with the reader's libido.

I've used the first person to generate embarrassment—on my own part for writing the stuff, and on the reader's part, reading what any sensible person would not talk about. Recently, my book *the buddhist* was an exploration of female blogging's pitfall of overconfession. Sure I was using material from my own life, but it was this mode of oversharing and public humiliation that I was interested in. In *Cunt Norton* most of the poems from the *Norton Anthology* that I "cunted" were not originally in the first person, but I made all the poems in the book first-person love poems, the "I" tossed back and forth between the lovers. So, again, the tone is of an intimacy between lovers that puts the reader in the pervy position of voyeur.

The first person always carries a certain amount of abjection with it. Like when I did these third-to-first-person translation exercises with undergrads. I took passages from *The English Patient* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and we simply chose which character's perspective we were going with, and we switched passages from third person to first, with no other changes other than fixing verb agreement. What surprised me is how judgmental the students were about the first-person voice. "She's so stuck up." "I don't believe what he's saying." The English patient, lying there dying in the first person, comes off totally full of himself. From this experiment I realized that the first person really has to prove him/herself. And of course, I've always been into problematizing the relationship between speaker and reader, breaking the social contract. I think that with my use of the first person, no matter how abject and whimpering I seem, there's a sadistic edge to it, as far as my treatment of the reader goes. Like they say in SM, topping from the bottom.

RD: Are there any lost or forgotten New Narrative writers?

DB: Marsha Campbell. I have an amazing unpublished piece by Marsha that Kevin and I are hoping to put in the New Narrative anthology that we're editing for Nightboat Books. Marsha was very important for me because in her poetry and her prose, she could do these awesome switches and surprises—but from a libidinal basis rather than being all cerebral. I was always trying to copy her and failing. The Nightboat anthology will collect classic texts from the New Narrative era, including writers whom people wouldn't necessarily think to associate with New Narrative. There'll be a big

Los Angeles contingent—besides Dennis Cooper, people like Leslie Dick, Bob Flanagan, Matias Viegener. Richard Hawkins is well known as an artist, but he's a fantastic prose writer as well. Bruce Benderson we really want. Lawrence Braithwaite—I don't think he's been forgotten, but he definitely deserves more attention. I'm really happy that Francesca Rosa has been publishing. I've always loved her work, but she wasn't publishing for a long time. I wouldn't say these people have necessarily been forgotten, but they've gone on to do other things so you wouldn't think of them as being involved. With the anthology, you'll get to see all these other connections. There will be people from New York, LA, Montreal.

New Narrative seems to me like a group of people who got together for a few years and then fell apart. As a successful literary movement it was kind of a joke. And now suddenly people are interested again.