

# *L E T T E R S*

Michael Gessner



# *LETTERS*

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*E2sks, with many hearts*

*i /*

In one season or in another

(At) the moment

the universe is being

divided up

(by)

guest speakers

discuss(ing) dimensionality

Somewhere their thoughts are recombining

themselves in unseen territories

creating other borderlines

attaching themselves

to multitudes,

“

On the way to Sky Harbor,  
the lights of residential  
areas in the gray-before-dawn  
scattered over the tilted land  
masses, the skirts of the south  
Phoenix Mountains blink  
on & off like civilizations.

*ii /*

Available to assume shape

& thus position.

The knowledge of the day was something

substantial; rain washing itself . . .

an alphabet of rain

“

(& the students who pretended not to notice each other & were in the long white  
silence of inertia, moving in & out of doorways in this, finally bumped into  
themselves in the laundromat)

Romance followed

(a toy wagon)

*iii /*

Soul: what lines have in common.

*soulish*—commiseration

with those intersections

Once we worshipped muscle

smooth vulva or phallus.

“

In Ephesus on a rainy day

I wandered down the grand promenade,  
& loitered among the ruined columns,  
the city, empty . . . the driver waited  
in his taxi . .

Afterward there will be  
great planes & blocks of light.

---

*iv /*

*La Lingua Terra*

I will not report the elderly  
sleeping in the library.  
They are too close to me.

Tracers in the night sky

These were also fragments.

And the chips of stone

In the streambed

were only mica & still shone  
sungold.

“

The miners went crazy.

v/

To be color

The fieldstone wall in autumn,  
The pink roses 'round the Bamberg Gate  
Powerscourt, & Irish gardens  
The black iron gate & gold-tipped tines,  
the petals, lips—

Diachronus  
y  
n  
c  
t he  
r  
o  
ten  
u  
faces

the structures of stellar systems  
like shapes in the Sonoran desert, the missions  
of San Xavier del Bac or Caborca, white doves,  
are those of drowned vessels  
in oceans of indigo

of the source & the return, of what occurs  
or is continual then in its occurring

*vi* /

Blue glass

The poem is (also) a letter to the future  
which cannot exist  
without it—

or ourselves, the same

& what we have known

& what can be known—

All the changing shapes 'round us & beyond us—

“

Ultimately we write to a future  
absent of our own species

& thus

the series of ceaseless changing . . .  
to oceans of space, to sea change  
& sea sons

(The poet, a yellow album)

& the forms between us—

artificial life—

letters & letter-albums

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

*vii /*

To Landscapes:

whose texts are white

as sheets

“

And still, fields of blue glass

---

viii /

On a Sunday afternoon  
we walked into the painted desert  
miles past the last cairn  
& found a porous white stone  
shaped like a toadstool/tabletop/hat.

the city  
is shaken  
to its  
foundation

We huddled underneath,  
took photographs—one of the party  
jumped up on the edge,  
the stalk cracked  
& tons of stone fell  
  
around us

White: Evening Primrose

*Oenothera albicaulis*

White: Euphorbia

*Euphorbia melanadenia*

“

*ix /*

Pichaco Peak, the site  
of twin ancient volcanoes,  
black slate, plugged with magma,  
& in spring tourists camp  
on the sides of these peaks

Conditions

brought by the great pla(i)nes  
of wildflowers stretching  
about them, across the highway  
over the desert—

Red Thistle

*Cirsium Arizonicum*

& Pink Fairy Duster

*Calliandra eriophylla*

& Blue Lupine

*Lupinus sparsiflorus*

& Orange Globe Mallow

*Sphaeralcea laxa*

Cousin Konrad:

Were the fantastical creatures  
of the imagination grafted & placed  
in the catalog the equivalent  
of others in nature? Was this nature?

Thumpa-dump-dump  
sounds overhead  
on a thatched roof  
creatures half

asleep—

*x /*

The new maps of motion  
cannot account for the unexpected arrival,  
another wave, the approaching billion bowlines  
shifting simultaneously & those  
which interact & still  
are static  
waiting for passage

varying periods unspecified

The scale is grander still  
& will crush the mind  
to flatness

tho' to voyagers, the voyage is still the voyage & pulls & pulls

red

more than bubbling Io,  
more than Ostia,  
Porto Fino, Sausalito  
& the tiled roofs  
of seacoast towns &  
the lives therein,  
landscapes of Europa

*xi* /

an operation, an entry  
in the Book of Incomplete Forms  
dried riverbed of salt  
uninhabited village:  
summer on the Palouse

ports

or “

which would be the necessary condition  
to this point excluded & for all our points

*xii /*

Novatus, anger will get you nowhere,  
& gets in the way of everything  
especially our young men  
& comes to us this way:  
we are born

even as constellations  
tumble in the sublime,  
in rage & elegance  
and in horror.

“

even in this.

castaways

---

*xiii /*

This is the case  
or it is not the case  
or it is partially so

The power of agreement  
exceeds knowledge

Principals banging against the paper gates,  
the cardboard roofing & flooring

A note from the Balearic Islands:

Among blue reeds  
at the edge of the Salt river  
there is the odor of marsh  
acid & deciduous

(Cities: if you are responsible . . .  
it cannot be for everything)

Say what you will but I am innocent  
of any wrongdoing

P. Suillius Rufus

*xiv /*

This & even in this  
in the smoke of autumn  
tobacco & maple leaves

What

What

What

knocking on doors

the gates of the village

& odors of burning leaf

the touches of honey & leather

in the cigar catalog,

hint of pepper, notes of cherry

anise,

buttery ones—the tone of texture—

& orange speckles on the tongue

wrapped like petals . . .

dull electronic bells of computers

& the tropes

The first love

could have been a convulsion,

wet dream or when we first

found ourselves, the conscious

a loan “

mind, the central one-and-only

a newness, a spine  
morning glory & dark shame thus  
pages & pages of text

*xv /*

O that the moon was water after all  
  
& therefore the making of phantoms  
phantom you & phantom me  
phantom eye

waterfalls

(of mine—colored shape of air)

If you are not here  
by my side  
(you are & you are  
not like summer  
heat, ) then I cannot  
be taken through this,

this Feast of Mammals,  
the immense, collapsible  
halls —  
o galaxies

xvi /

“

C o n d i t i o n s

, waves—grief, acceptance, dismay—

& ETC.

Tropical storms, we find our descriptions.

Clothes for a growing child.

Genealogy, the soliloquy  
the history of renown  
the history of (a/) history  
bright flags.

---

Pyrethria

At Ostia

Something between lives, a permanent occasion—

The body of adoration lay in seafoam.

*xvii /*

By the shore  
blowing Eucalyptus,  
African Sumac

The timid boy with the bowl  
of scented bath oil making the rounds  
Through discussions heavy with empire  
In the summer of fixations  
A small deer grazing among evergreen trees

*umbra mortis*

I awoke late  
& tried to pack my things  
in the dark.

*xviii /*

In the Center for Communicable Diseases  
someone left the Manual of Falling Forms  
on the picnic table,  
the wind came up in the late afternoon  
and blew the pages back  
and blew the pages back

*xix /*

& there I was

behind the counter

in the pharmacy of homeopathy

with the impatient figure

filling heteronyms

Phosphorus for aversion

delirium & muttering

*Pulsatilla nigricans* wind flower

for fear of the dark

*Lycopodium clavatum*

raving, hallucinations,  
desire for company

*Solanum dulcamara* climbing nightshade

(& cousin: *Solanaceae Solanum dulcamara* bitter nightshade)

inflammation, buzzing, scalp & eye

Serapium at Alexandria,

the library at Celsius,

San Giorgio Maggiore

letters to the dead

& San Giorgio Maggiore

with its suicidal Christ

venerable tribute to Venus

a divine case

of subject-as-medium

& al(l)ways

a polyphonous syllable

Yrs.

Since like cures like, a draft of a draft of the *Simillium* should like a mountain wind through the crack of an abandoned miner's shack offer the prospect of a case for consciousness both multiple & simultaneous. Corollary: the single voice of the lone proprietor is insufficient. Shape & reshape. Now & for the course.

Essences.

Hahneman & F. Pessoa

xx /

Trips of a lifetime: girl to the hairdressers, first visit, boy to zoo, airline flight, politician to convention, the county fair, memorials, tributes, diagnoses, debuts, quest-central & the journeys of waterfowl, bees & garden insects, phyla & sub-phyla marching to the narrator's song watching them all morning for several days, & there I was in bed with a cold winding & unwinding the double helix of the heart

spongy

&

bouncy

twisted like a peeled orange rind

a rind

electronic embassies

report emissions

& recorded (at Kitt Peak, et. al.)

among the mountain bluebirds

that land on the tables of tourists

emissaries

& cousins

on the Piazzini San Marco

or the Platz Bad Konigshofen

& Wurzburg's Square

where children sing at evening

“

But the cycles were cumbrous

personal & diachronic

& with rings on each finger

satyr & fawn sunk in vice

the dead

as an individual recursive

and across history he said

dead

dead

steps leading to the sea

where bodies are pacific odes

idylls of Orpheus

*xxi /*

Sentences:

if you wish to write

do not discourage me

with the details of your life

do not write

to say we speak only

of ourselves

& if there is any longing left

let it be the longing for contempt

enough is enough

it is over for now

I know you do not desire

the absence of anything

& as always

we were willing to sacrifice ourselves

for thunder

or for something else

that was not entirely known

---

*xxii /*

## City of Glass

At the landfill outside of town  
during the night hours, Vico sits  
atop a smoldering pile of rubble  
noting the factory lights.

Sleepy now the pulse nods with agreement  
all else is unacceptable

it is nearly dawn  
soon the children will come alive  
silly with sperm & ganglia  
skipping to the schoolyard  
to multiply themselves  
in some androgynous configuration  
your notion before its sound

we must negotiate  
with machines  
thought slows  
the excessive day  
of confinement

the night accepts  
the talk of institutions  
explained only through  
themselves

holding hands  
to join

the grinding of mills  
& the clanging of foundries

xxiii /

A few things occur to the conscious mind

& these occupy us

for the remainder of our lives

the mail delivered to the factories

is placed in the 'addressee unknown' bin—

they do not carry the company name

as the primary respondent/receiver

[Tho' during the course

it is possible

to acquire variations,

recombinative & thus

to find those offices

above the staircase

“

(signature unreadable)

they are occupied with us

more or less

addressed to individual recipients

& understood as group behavior

for survival of the organization

& for prosperity

throughout the *corso*

unrecognized

opposed & opposing]

in the case of the individual

& talent

Note: All explanation & sentiment have been denied entry: these buildings, condemned.

—The Fire Eaters

*xxiv /*

Circling things—

if the best day was  
the day Brazil slipped off  
into the ocean  
toward Pangeia  
if only to defy convention

the most memorable  
& Norway broke apart  
from its coastline

it would have been  
enough

& its own drifting isle  
whatever was the best  
never compared to any other

set aside

---

in a decorated chamber  
was it the same day  
even as it was spoken

what was it for you, Lucius  
about to step into the perfumed bath  
as the perfect vow carried off

by Comus  
or another relative  
caught in a glass case







## DIRECTIONS FOR READERS

Although this poem was not written to be performed, as say a dramatic verse play might be performed, the prospect of some kind of production for voices began to suggest itself with increasing presence as the poem went along, growing as it were from itself through an interplay of utterances. This is not to imply that any possible benefits derived from such a reading are more desirable than those available to the imagination of the individual reader in a private setting.

With a multivoiced reading, however, the interplay of words and lines, whether vertically down the page singly, or in blocks, or in some crisscross fashion, (or both, which may require re-readings of the same lines in dissimilar order,) the spontaneity of the utterance, the simultaneous expression with chorus, speaker(s) or in combination, should be encouraged to be improvisational inasmuch as the text allows without being set aside or replaced. The possibilities of such an approach should become apparent with a first reading.

The exchange of utterances should be recombined as much as natural elements are recombined so as to offer moments of assimilation and thus, lucidity as found in the world or in poems.

The ensemble should interact as to present an arrangement that is both simultaneous and multiple in its experience so poetry might still achieve one of its more important functions, the anticipation of history.

The presence of space and silence equals the role of utterance; stands in contrast to, and as a multidimensional extension of, the entries; an introduction to the metaversal and those conditions which emerge from its company. Likewise, when speaking, the members of the chorus—a set of three individuals who stand at a slant and off to the side behind the two primary readers, male and female—may step forward into the light as is provided, then as their lines are given, recede into the darkness.

When duets occur, given by the primary speakers, the male or the female voice may be accentuated as needed to emphasize content. While there may be gender identity associated with the text, there is no character identity. Otherwise, the voices are anonymous. In other duet readings that do not require one voice, or the other to assume the more noticeable overlay, voices should be balanced in shared projection to form an androgynous delivery.

### **Biographical Note:**

*Earthly Bodies*, (Pudding House Pr., 2004,) *Surfaces*, (March Street Pr., 2006,) are some of Gessner's more recent titles. His work has appeared in *American Literary Review* *Chiron Review*, *Journal of The American Medical Association*, (JAMA,) *Nimrod*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Pacific Review*, *Sycamore Review*, and others. Anthologized by St. Martin's Press, and *Writer's Digest Books*, his poetry has been called 'Striking,' (David Barber, *The Atlantic*,) and favorably reviewed by Lawrence Joseph and Alison Hawthorne Deming. He lives in Tucson, Arizona with his wife, Jane Catharine, and their son, Christopher.