

"Schooled in Wanderings"

Interview with Molly Bendall by Vidhu Aggarwal

From her first book, *After Estrangement* (1992) to her fourth and most recent collection *Under the Quick* (2009), Molly Bendall has developed a body of lyric poems which ritualizes and estranges the feminine in pleasurable and perverse ways. With sharp wit, Bendall examines the female body in in-between spaces, as it fluctuates between subject and object "Knuckle me hither, // a jewel croaks. // Sink your tummy 'til it sleeps / on the rug so woven // in electric blue" ("Reminds me of Panic"). Bendall's syntax is tactile, but it defies immediate interpretation. In *Under the Quick*, the scene is mobile: fairy tale, crime scene, domestic interior, shipwreck. Accessories and natural elements alike possess a dangerous erotic energy.

The very act of viewing—the female gaze—enlivens, arouses spells, charms, and seductive, retractable atmospheres. Even in the earlier work, there the sense of the master conjurer, giving a command performance: "If they'd told me to recapture / the rhododendron glaze narrowly, or chaperone the night's answer, I would have . . . But how to lure myself away // from my own body" ("Condition"). In her newer poems, Bendall charts charged encounters with animals, turning to a more primal consciousness, "[s]lowing up the stare," pressing for a different type of intimacy and viewing as if to find a place before naming: "Don't watch them with names" ("Schooled in Wandering"). In addition to publishing the full-length collections *Dark Summer* (1999) and *Ariadne's Island* (2002), Molly Bendall has also co-authored *Bling & Fringe* (2009) with Gail Wronksy..

What follows is a conversation that occurred over email from late 2012 to early 2013 and a portfolio of poems from her innovative wide-ranging collections:

“Conversation with Eva Hesse” (from *After Estrangement*)

“Condition” (from *Dark Summer*)

“Charmed” (from *Ariadne’s Island*)

“Reminds Me of Panic” (from *Under the Quick*)

“Schooled in Wandering” (from recent work)

VA: In a recent Octopus review of Under the Quick, Suzette Bishop discusses your life as “a former professional ballerina” and your “choreographed language.” Most recently, ballet has been presented as a sort of tortured, compulsive female aesthetics such as in Black Swan. What part does ballet have to do with your poetry? How did you come into poetry through dance?

MB: First of all I will say that having pursued ballet pretty seriously when I was young helped me to be acquainted with the practice of art itself and the long process of perfecting one’s craft. Ballet does have an obsessive aspect to it, but I think that movie made those tendencies into magnified melodrama. As a teenager I did love the aesthetics of it, such as the costumes, the pointe shoes, the theatre, the intricacies of the movements, ritual aspects of the practice. Ballet was otherworldly and transformative for me, in spite of the long and often tedious hours. Obviously poetry doesn’t have the grueling physical demands of dance (at least most of the time!) but it requires similar discipline and devotion.

It seemed like a natural transition for me to go from dance to poetry-- to me, the sense of the body in dance and all its large and small articulations creating a complex enactment of experience corresponds to language in the making of a poem. Both dance and poetry express rhythms of thought and reflect the struggle to reconcile the physical and metaphysical.

The poet Valery talks about the poem and dance creating a state of mind and how they both impose their own laws. I realize this idea of a self-contained world could seem solipsistic and a fairly unpopular stance to take right now because it seems that it’s not engaged in or reacting to the events of our current time enough. However, I think a poem or dance can perform the tensions, resolutions obstacles,

and desires of our contemporary world. Valery goes on to say that “the dancer sometimes seems to be reacting to an unforeseen incident...”

I’m drawn to the idea that the poems gesture toward meaning, and often insinuate but don’t necessarily represent or correspond directly to a specific content.

VA: In thinking about your recent poems, I kept accidentally referring to the title of your collection Under the Quick as In the Cut, a movie by Jane Campion that is a vivid, fragmented murder mystery of sorts. But then I realized that for me, there is a sense of your work that strikes me as accessing a scene of a crime, or an intensely private ritual, like “In a Place of Danger,” which is also strangely cinematic. For me your recent work activates certain voyeuristic, peephole pleasures. Can you speak of your relationship to cinema?

MB: One of the things I want to do is create tableaux that suggest scenarios or dramas that are not seen in full or are glimpsed in partial light. Part of this feeling of “peephole pleasures” and eavesdropping may come from speakers that I often have who invite or beckon some “other” to engage and who also trace their own processes of engagement or creation. Sometimes that results in erotic overtones. But I think that some rhetorical gestures and speech acts are sensual and alluring in and of themselves and, as you say, point to a sort of private ritual.

And as for cinema—I’m not exactly a film connoisseur, but there are several films I love that to me are close to what I love in a poem, *The Mirror*—Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Double Life of Veronique*—Krzysztof Kieslowski, and *2046*—Wong Kar-Wai. Typical expectations of time, perspective, and even identity are subverted in varying degrees

in these films. And I'm also really interested in Terrence Malick's films in which the landscape seems to become a character. All of these filmmakers masterfully create a dream logic as they indulge in depicting lush textures, beauty of the physical body, and shadows of threats or danger. And as a spectator of these films, I feel they activate a voyeuristic pleasure for me.

VA: Stephen Burt has spoken of this fleeting privacy of Under the Quick. I am really interested in that simultaneity of spectacle and privacy which has been present throughout all of your books from Dark Summer, Ariadne's Island—and now has become even more abstracted, emptied of surrounding narrative. Could you speak a little about that movement?

MB: I'm very interested in language that creates its own logic but can still evoke mood and weather and psychic conditions. In Ariadne's Island I wanted to conjure a particular landscape—a island setting with its own ecosystem and props and wildlife etc, and I wanted also to put forth an internal world and consciousness of the speaker. A lyric speaker, by the way, who possesses divisions and shifting stances within itself-- a voice that may direct and invite outwardly and at the same time be engaged in self-reflexive dialogue.

In my fourth book *Under the Quick* I was inspired by some oral poetic traditions, such as charms and incantations (pieces of them echo in some of the poems) in which language deliberately keeps meaning hidden, but its textures and suggestiveness resonate and “perform.” I also mined memories and lore from my own childhood growing up in Virginia. The landscape, the atmosphere, and verbal scraps, all come into play, moving in and out of the frame. I wanted images and phrases to build on one another, threatening the disappearance of any central subject.

I'm drawn to Barbara Guest's idea about "Tales" (as opposed to "stories") from her book of essays *Forces of Imagination* in which she says, "Tales are stories about stories; they are brought to us from memory and arrive with often an antique finish; they are also arrived from the deep unconscious of a country or place." She goes on to say, "Its remoteness from the center of things is what is endearing about a Tale...it tells us what it dreams about."

And Barbara Guest's poetry has been a great inspiration for me. I will say that her work along with the poems of the Irish poet Medbh McGuckian and Theodore Roethke's middle period of work (Praise to the End) were so instructive as far as demonstrating a fearlessness in making disjunctive moves, unfastening words from their familiar usages, and refashioning linear logic. And I think their poems induce other forms of consciousness and generate unique and imaginative geographies with their inventive constructs of language.

VA: Given this sense of privacy in your work, how do you describe your experiences in poetic collaboration with poet Gail Wronsky?

MB: It was such fun working on collaborations with Gail Wronsky whose poetry I admire immensely. We stumbled onto the projects after we had brought up some issue or observation in conversation. First, we wrote our "cowgirl poetry" which resulted in two books and later our book *Bling & Fringe: The L.A. Poems*. Gail and I worked by sending poems back and forth—a correspondence or epistolary mode. I enjoy the banter that develops this way, and it allows for moments of running with the other's thought or mocking it or challenging it in playful ways. In *Bling & Fringe* we experimented with the form of the poems and with "fashionable language" and the various meanings that had for us.

The practice of collaborating compelled me to use vocabulary and idioms I probably wouldn't have otherwise. We let our wit and humorous sides out in these modes more, and we didn't take ourselves too seriously. Perhaps that's because of the social aspect of the endeavor. The tradition of poetic collaboration with poets of the past, such as the surrealists and the New York school poets (just to name a couple) was also an inspiration.

VA: Finally, your newer poems have a sort of animal consciousness. Could you speak a little about where you are going and what you are doing now?

MB: I am presently working on poems that dwell in the human experience of animals in a zoo. I've become more aware of my reactions and moods when I'm at the zoo—the feelings of yearning, loss, bewilderment and even delight. In this sense, the poems are not precisely about animals, or about zoos, or even about the human observer, but about the ontological space of experiencing animals within the leisure “park.” Without specifically naming the type of animal, I hope the poems allow the actual details of animal behavior to inhabit a shared space with the sympathies and imagination of the observer.

I've also been reading a lot of natural histories and accounts of wild animals being brought into captivity, as well as more philosophical works about animals by authors such as John Berger and Jean-Christophe Bailly. John Berger's book *Why Look at Animals?* states among other things that zoos are merely a monument to human/animal encounters and that animals are completely reduced to tokens in a zoo or wild animal park. I like to think that there is still room for the imagination—the human imagination AND maybe even the animal's imagination. Berger claims that we cannot truly encounter

the look (or gaze) of an animal in a zoo. This is something to ponder and mourn. *The Animal Side* by Jean-Christophe Bailly (trans. by Catherine Porter) meditates on art, philosophy and poetry in order to stress the importance that we as humans should move beyond human exclusivity and understand that animals gaze upon the world.